



# MATRILINEAL PERFORMANCE-TO-CAMERA: EXPLORING MATERNAL AESTHETICS AND THE FRAME.



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## **Abstract**

This practice-based PhD is located in the field of live art practice and looks at the relationship between the camera and artworks that are critical of phallocentrism. It proposes a radical address to maternal methodology, using a series of performance-to-camera works where the focus is on the matrilineal and mother-daughter relationships. It focuses on maternal theorising, which is prevalent in contemporary feminist theory, and the nascent maternal aesthetic that forms the subject matter of the performance and art-making reviewed here. I include collaborative practice with photographer, Alan Duncan, and my eldest daughter, Matilda. I argue that power imbalances and representational autonomy cannot be challenged effectively by performance-to-camera *per se*, however, when aligned with maternal aesthetics, in this instance, mother-daughter and matrilineal performance, the critique is re-invigorated because aesthetic distance and the latent influence of binary thought are not pre-supposed or engaged with uncritically.

The first chapter locates the practice-based research within a context of feminist theory; artists Ana Mendieta and Jemima Stehli, and the philosophy of Luce Irigaray, underpin my subsequent performance interventions as inherently resistant to phallocentric objectification. The second chapter discusses how critiques are re-ignited, via Alison Stone, when mother-daughter relationships are explored in women's performance and how combining this with Derrida's Parergon acts on the distancing effect of the frame. The establishment of a maternal aesthetic is supported by primary interviews, presented as oral histories in the form of recordings, with artists Shirley Cameron, Evelyn Silver, Tracey Kershaw and Sam Rose. Finally, the third chapter considers maternal aesthetics, both as an art practice and a practice of care, to establish it as a radical approach that differs widely from traditional Western aesthetics. I draw on Jessica Benjamin's intersubjective theory to demonstrate a relational approach to the maternal, and I emphasise the role of play as having nurturing qualities and, simultaneously, as material within my practice. This research has been crucial to the burgeoning area of maternal aesthetics because it makes work visible that has previously been absent in mainstream art criticism and canonisation. Original artworks have been produced, that interrogate the relationship between Derrida, Irigaray, the frame and the maternal.

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## Introduction

This thesis is a practice-based research project that has created original artworks through performance-to-camera, and it is situated in the field of live art practice. These performances are created in a photography studio in collaboration with photographer and lighting technician Alan Duncan. My choice of a sterile studio and collaboration with Duncan were both conscious decisions integral to the practice, because I wanted strong shadows and backdrops to convey staging, and artificial light to give the viewer a clear indication of the photographic space. In the first performance-to-camera I made in this way I carried the emotion of trying to re-connect with my Nana whilst attempting to fit in her wedding gown which was far too small for me. I had, prior to this, experimented on my own with performance-to-camera and manipulating and animating objects knowing that when captured by the camera they come to life and make fleeting objects in space<sup>1</sup>. I asked Duncan to shoot me attempting to wear my nana's dress, with a fast frame rate camera, in order to capture the shapes the dress made as it filled with air. I hoped to convey a sense of haunting, of embodiment through objects, and to blur distinctions of subject/object. When I approached Duncan to collaborate again, in 2011, I had a clear idea about how I wanted the studio to look and the need to capture with the camera at a fast rate, however, in regards to the performance I only knew I was going to travel through the space in search of the frame's edge. I wanted to communicate something about women's subjectivity and its relationship to, looking, acting, passivity and agency<sup>2</sup>. I had begun a conscious utilisation, as well as a personal development, of what, I will argue, is part of a wider maternal aesthetic in this thesis.

The initial starting point for my research had been a consideration of the loss of aura in the artwork at the hands of mechanical reproduction, following Walter Benjamin's 1950s seminal text *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. I was interested in the subsequent impact, theoretically, on performance as digital

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<sup>1</sup> I had made a companion piece called *My Grandpa's Ties* (2005), where I had used my Grandpa's ties to create wings and had then performed a shamanic ritual of my own design referencing his Ghanaian heritage. The performance ended with me creating a golem like figure from the ties. Please refer to image of *My Grandpa's Ties* (2005) in the Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> How I ended up collaborating not only with Duncan but also my eldest daughter Matilda is explained in full in Chapter Two.

mediatisation became prevalent<sup>3</sup>. Through engaging with theorists Luce Irigaray<sup>4</sup> and Jacques Derrida<sup>5</sup> I realised that my concern was not loss of aura per se, rather lack, specifically women's representational lack. My subsequent research comprises of a critique of the reliance on binary oppositions that traditional Western fine art aesthetics has become trapped in. I make use of feminist philosophy and its analysis of phallogentrism, as the means to enforce women's cultural invisibility, and combine this with a deconstruction exercise on the frame, via Derrida, called the parergon. Derrida's deconstructionism evidences the instability of a framed artwork that claims to distinguish clearly between the world and aesthetic process. Through aligning my work with the parergon, the object or subject in an image or sculpture which is peripheral rather than integral, and Irigaray's argument that women have been culturally repressed (phallogentrism), I demonstrate that staging a critique of traditional fine art aesthetics through performance-to-camera is not contradictory. Through the exploitation of the contradictions and the self-reflexivity of the work, it becomes apparent that to shore up binary oppositions places immense strain on the frame. From this initial position, I then consider how to be seen and heard. There is a

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<sup>3</sup> This is discussed shortly on pp. 19-20 of this thesis, it is now referred to as the Liveness Debate.

<sup>4</sup> Irigaray is my primary source that evidences the existence of a phallogentric order, and the hierarchy placed upon gender, as well as women's struggles to attain agency and subjectivity. She is a French psychoanalytical theorist and philosopher, who wrote her seminal work *Speculum of the Other Woman* in the 1970s. Irigaray was part of what is now called the second-wave feminist movement, she was heavily influenced by her desire to deconstruct psychoanalytical thinkers such as Freud as well as the trajectory of Western philosophical thought via Plato. She has been followed by theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz, who describe her methodology as corporeal feminism, and ascribe to a similar methodology exposing the philosophical over-reliance on metaphors that rely on women's bodies, for example, Plato's infamous cave aka the womb. Plato writes about the cave in his *Republic* first written in 380 B.C, Irigaray addresses the heavy over reliance on women's bodies and their subjective experience as well as phallogentrism's inability to acknowledge this in *Speculum of the Other Woman's* section on Plato (Irigaray, 1985, pp. 243- 364). Since then she has been critiqued by theorists such as Judith Butler for being essentialist. There are many other feminists, for example, Rosi Braidotti who do not concur with such criticisms, arguing instead that women need some form of collective identity in order to mobilise and establish cultural identity. Irigaray uses the technique of mimicry in a two-fold sense, both on the inside and outside of other philosophers and analysts work, such as Sigmund Freud's, at once both pretending to be Freud and Plato, and at the same time exposing their latent sexist presumptions and pre-suppositions through taking their claims to their logical conclusions, for example, women's inherent passivity is exposed as a myth by questioning Freud's motives.

<sup>5</sup> My deployment of Derrida within this thesis is specifically in regards to the section of *The Truth in Painting* (Derrida, 1987a) that deals with the parergon. More generally Derrida developed a form of semiotic analysis known as deconstructionism. I make much use of Derrida's deconstruction exercise on the frame in this thesis and my practice based work, when thinking about the best way to critique traditional western aesthetics reliance on binaries I looked inside the frame and discovered that it implodes on itself as it works far too hard to uphold what is ultimately an impossible and false premise. That is the binary of internal/ external. The photograph is an ideal place to replicate this tension as that which is extraneous to the image always creeps in.



connection between binaries; which I have discovered are an inherent property of the photograph via the frame and aesthetics, and Irigaray's notion of the indeterminate nature of women's subjectivity; which is the root cause of her lack and therefore her invisibility. The link suggests that those who do not conform to the binary distinctions in phallogentric culture will be ignored or erased. My practice offers an aesthetic created in the indeterminate and unseen reverse or obscured place that women occupy, called, as previously mentioned, maternal aesthetics. This aesthetic is strongly associated with our being-in-the-world as foregrounded in the experiential and best expressed through Martin Heidegger's notion of Dasein. Namely that we access the world through tools, acts of care and our experiences; in this instance the camera and mothering. I work from the exterior of what makes an image that is the equipment and the frame, towards aesthetics and process in order to discuss the interior or subject matter of my practice and thereby advance performance-to-camera as critical of phallogentrism.

The focus on matrilineal connections, care, and play, ultimately create a new space which is not reliant on the binary nature of the art object/ experience. In other words the progression of an aesthetic that is not reliant on binaries allows for an intersubjective approach better suited to intergenerational collaborations and conversation. The shift in what is of value moves away from untouchable beauty and aura that we may encounter in more traditional fine art contexts, and becomes instead about process, mutual recognition and development.

## 1: Key Terms

### *Feminism and the Maternal*

Under consideration are power and agency, embodiment, materiality, separation, representation, subjectivity and spectatorship, ethics and care. In this context the maternal is combined with aesthetics and thereby deployed here as a term which conceptually, figuratively and literally involves one's children in artistic production. To include the maternal is more than just a pragmatic decision<sup>6</sup>; it is metaphysically challenging to notions of individualism, subjectivity and agency. In this way, the maternal is theorised by feminist philosophers, Adriana Cavarero, Alison Stone, Jessica Benjamin, Elizabeth Grosz, Bracha Ettinger, Sara Ruddick, Julia Kristeva, Andrea Liss and Luce Irigaray<sup>7</sup>, as both resistant to the residues of phallogentrism that are encountered within philosophy, culture and social contexts, and as something which can also render these structures irrelevant. Conversely, the over-determination of the maternal and the feminine is also a phallogentric myth, where the woman is assigned as matter or material in her function as bearer of children. However, when maternal aesthetics is consciously deployed by women artists, that is, when an artist makes conscious use of the maternal in their work, it tends to act as a discursive tool which can expose this myth as a construct, such as in Mary

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<sup>6</sup> In Chapter 2, I address maternal pragmatism in the practices of Lena Šimić, Shirley Cameron and Grace Surman. I compare some of the ethical dilemmas involved with the scandal that has surrounded the photographer's Sally Mann and Tierney Gearon who have both very publicly exhibited their images of intimacy from their family life.

<sup>7</sup> My main evidence for this perspective is Irigaray's argument for women's propensity to exceed the body's boundaries and confound phallogentric dualisms (Irigaray, 1985). However, more contemporary writing from Alison Stone (2012), Andrea Liss (eds. Chernick and Klein, 2011) and Adriana Cavarero (1995), for example, continues to support the view that maternal symbolism is both subversive, culturally repressed and also essential in a process that actively addresses phallogentric myths of masculinity. The maternal and repressed maternal symbolisms foreground everything from philosophy, to aesthetics and psychoanalytic theory, which is a point argued by Irigaray (1985), Elizabeth Grosz (1990) and Cavarero. Jessica Benjamin continues the critique of the phallogentric bias in psychoanalysis by challenging the standard viewpoint in developmental process that the mother and child separate (1990), which is particularly damaging for daughters who must renounce the feminine. Benjamin (1990) proposes following, instead, a theory of relation to the other. The significance of the relationship formed between infant and mother is also the focus of Alison Stone's theorising on the maternal, and is the focus of my own practice, *My Studio Performances with Matilda* (2011-2012). Grosz and Bracha Ettinger are not the focus of this thesis but it is important to mention their contribution as they both emphasise in their writing the importance of corporeality and the womb. Kristeva's *Stabat Mater* (1985) is another classic text that emphasises women's centrality in Western philosophical conception and their suppression and veneration through religion. Kristeva's argument that the matricide is dominant in Western culture is also challenged by Benjamin and Stone's writing on the maternal, where the mother is not consumed or violently forced out during the child's separation from the mother, but rather their relationship endures in the form of mutual recognition (Benjamin, 1990, p.30).

Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1976), where the mother-child relationship is aestheticised, conceptualised and theorised, simultaneously.

### *The Camera*

The practice-based elements of this thesis use the camera as the medium through which to materialise my practice in the form of performance-to-camera. Using the camera, in this way, within a feminist framework, is inherently problematic because it has a distancing effect. The camera looks and records, and therefore, by association, the camera also functions as symbolic of the impulse to frame, to insert itself, and to set oppositions in place between, such elements as proximity and distance, and absence and presence. The camera is invasive and seeks to penetrate. Good examples of where it can be found include the paparazzi, voyeurism, CCTV, selfies, pornography, ultrasound and medical cameras<sup>8</sup>. However, in its application in performance-to-camera, I argue that the camera can also deconstruct all of the above. The more subtle processes of othering and forming subjectivities are apparent in the early performances-to-camera. Artists such as Ana Mendieta<sup>9</sup> (artworks produced 1972-1985), discussed in Chapter One, were aware from the on-set of their artistic careers of the power afforded them in staging their performances through the camera and siting them in the photographic space. Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975) is a seminal work because it exemplifies the dualistic thinking behind aesthetics, and brings the inside into the image and, literally, out of the performer's body. Performance-to-camera can also respond to latent displays of phallic symbolism as critiqued by feminist artists, for

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<sup>8</sup> I looked extensively at Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1991), as well as Jeremy Bentham's theory formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century on the panopticon, which is a type of institutional building as well as a system of control. There is also a breadth of literature on the male gaze, Laura Mulvey's essay on *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) is one of the more well-known examples, as well as Kaja Silverman's writing, and artworks such as Mona Hatoum's *Corps Etranger* where we can enter the inside of the body via the camera's view of the interior of her body as it travels down her throat.

<sup>9</sup> Mendieta was a Cuban artist living and working in America, she was one of the earlier proponents of body art, or body performance. Mendieta also directed work towards the camera. She died prematurely in 1985 under, what were later deemed, somewhat suspicious circumstances, there are still many that believe her death may have been the result of domestic abuse at the hands of her boyfriend. Her untimely demise sparked the process 'Where is Ana Mendieta?' a protest in 1992 outside the Guggenheim Museum.

example, Stehli's *Table* (1998) responds to Allen Jones's fetish images<sup>10</sup> that both reassure and shore-up masculinities. My use of the camera can be defined as part of a performance-to-camera method because it is inherently self-reflexive and interrogates the nature of the camera's deployment and its mechanistic and specular nature.

### *Performance*

In this context, performance is another means with which to investigate philosophical material through the body, namely as a tool used to create meaning. Performance is not only the rehearsed and the staged, it is also immediate and subjective. Performance is a mode of knowledge production, reliant on direct experience and, most importantly, derived from emotional response. In this context, it is deemed an act of agency within fine art aesthetics, and it follows a live art practice methodology<sup>11</sup> where it is informed by the everyday. I am concerned with performance that is born out of direct engagement with life experience, and where the process is emphasised as more important than the result. Performance implies

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<sup>10</sup> *Chair* by Allen Jones (1969), is an example of the woman's body appropriated by male artists as a fetishized and sensationalised object.

<sup>11</sup> In the words of the Live Art Development Agency:

The term Live Art is not a description of an art-form or discipline, but a cultural strategy to include experimental processes and experiential practices that might otherwise be excluded from established curatorial, cultural and critical frameworks. Live Art is a framing device for a catalogue of approaches to the possibilities of liveness by artists who chose to work across, in between, and at the edges of more traditional artistic forms.

Live Art has generated what Joshua Sofaer has referred to as 'an explosion of conventional aesthetics', as a gene pool of artists, whose work is rooted in a broad church of disciplines, have crossed each other's paths, blurred each other's edges and, in the process, opened up new creative forms.

To talk about Live Art is to talk about art that invests in ideas of process, presence and experience as much as the production of objects or things; art that wants to test the limits of the possible and the permissible; and art that seeks to be alert and responsive to its contexts, sites and audiences.

Live Art offers a space in which artists can take formal and conceptual risks, create a context to look at different mediums of expression, explore ideas of process, presence and endurance, and investigate relationships with an audience.

For many artists, Live Art is a generative force: to destroy pretence, to create sensory immersion, to shock, to break apart traditions of representation, to open different kinds of engagement with meaning.

Live Art practices have constructed new strategies for the expression of identities, and for many women, gay, culturally diverse and disabled artists, Live Art has proved to be a potent site, where the disenfranchised and disembodied become visible, and where the politics of difference are contested (LADA, nd).

collective experience, audience engagement, the body, risk and spontaneity. Performance also promises new or alternative languages and forms of expression.

### *Performance-to-Camera*

In my practice, the camera is used to invert specular processes where it immerses itself in that which is deeply personal and becomes the in-between space of the Derridean parergon (Derrida, 1987a). The camera is cast in a role, not as inflictor or aggressor, but as facilitator. My process differs from earlier performance-to-camera work because I am not concerned with representing a space of conflict between the subject and the device, such as in the way Ana Mendieta has done in *Untitled Rape Scene* (1973). Rather, for me the camera facilitates and grants the space to explore, play and experiment with my daughter. The camera is not simply the means to intervene it is a process that allows and facilitates the development of the emerging subjectivity of myself and my daughter. In postmodernity, the camera has been exposed as subjective in the writing of Roland Barthes (1981), Susan Sontag (1977), John Berger (1972), and Fredric Jameson<sup>12</sup> who theorises on the intentional breakdown of the concept of subjective and objective shots in cinema (Jameson, 2015, pp. 177-178). The camera has lost the authority to frame reality and keep things apart, such as the inside and the outside; we can interact with it in different ways and with different attitudes, either with hostility or through collaboration.

## **2: Key Themes**

I will briefly discuss the key themes of the thesis and present the guiding problem, the approach I will be taking, the research questions and the broader context of the research. I will then discuss the rationale for the methodology and theoretical framework that I have chosen, before discussing the relevant and critical literature and theorists in the field, and will explain how this has informed my focus within my research by practice.

My thesis is concerned with the inter-generational connections between women, communicated by my use of matrilineal symbolisms, such as the relationship

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<sup>12</sup> Fredric Jameson is a Marxist cultural theorist best known for his writing on post-modernity and capitalism in the early 1990s.

between myself and one of my daughters, and my relationship with my deceased grandmother. Through objects such as my grandmother's wedding gown and the camera's mechanism namely its ability to frame. I aim to establish the limits of performance-to-camera as a critique of the representation of women and their experience. This research has been undertaken in the field of live art within a fine art practice context, and within the theoretical relationship between performance practice and feminist critique. In the intersections between feminist theory and performance practice that follow a critical mode, I form part of the current resurgence in emphasis on the maternal experience<sup>13</sup>.

I concentrate on performance from the 1960s to the present day, performance that has occurred within feminist frameworks and that tends to use the camera as a metaphor, as a symbol, or as an executor of phallocentrism, a term devised by Irigaray<sup>14</sup>. My focus is performance that is contextualised as fine art practice and which concerns itself with dismantling aesthetic binaries, the gaze, or objectification through the look, defined here as interventionist within the broader scope of feminist activism and avant-garde theatre. I am particularly concerned with performance as a means to play out the antagonisms and collaborations that women have had with the camera. I am working from the perspective proposed by Irigaray (1985) that women are, and have been historically, subjected to objectification and repression in a system that is often described as *patriarchy* by more radical second wave feminist theorists and activists such as Shulamith Firestone in the 1970s, namely a system whereby certain sections of society, such as white middle class men, benefit more readily than others, and that visual representations in culture can aid these processes.

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<sup>13</sup> Seminal books on the topic have been published in the last decade, and organisations such as *Mamsie* (Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics), based at Birkbeck in the USA. In the UK, LADA has recognised maternal performance as a focused practice and has collected and collated relevant work, courtesy of Lena Šimić and Emily Underwood-Lee. Alison Stone and Sara Ruddick have both emphasised the politically charged nature of invoking the maternal. In London, initiatives such as the *Mother Art House* continue to support and champion mother artists and their practice.

<sup>14</sup> *Speculum of the Other Woman* (first published in 1974) directly addresses notions of phallocentrism and the role that the visual plays in reinforcing power imbalances.

The use of visual representations of women interacting with daughters, mothers and grandmothers, which is part of a *maternal aesthetics*<sup>15</sup>. I will argue that my personal discovery of maternal symbolisms and processes has provided a methodology that progresses a critique of subjectivity in this context. Therefore, I argue that the realisation of the potency of working within maternal aesthetics and matrilineal connections is a radical move in the context of our phallogentric culture. The feminist framework at which I will be looking comprises Irigaray's work in the 1970s theorising women's subjective lack, particularly her use of the term phallogentrism to describe the domination of phallic symbolism in aesthetics, theory, psychoanalysis and philosophy (Irigaray, 1985). I bring together Irigaray's theorising on women's subjective lack with Derrida's<sup>16</sup> blurring of binaries, here I focus on the parergon section in his essay written in the 1980s, *The Truth in Painting* (1987a). I utilise Derrida's sustained deconstruction of binaries (ibid), coupled with Irigaray's deployment of the *Speculum* (Irigaray, 1985, pp. 133- 364) as the symbolic instrument of women's repression and containment. In my practice the underside or reverse for Irigaray (ibid), and the in-between or parergon a place or object not intrinsic or extrinsic for Derrida (Derrida, 1987a, pp. 69- 82), are the spaces of my maternal aesthetics. Here the camera symbolises containment through the specular, however, my aim in deploying Derrida's deconstruction of the frame is to demonstrate that performance-to-camera can be incredibly destabilising. The practice and the aesthetic process I employ are tasked with creating this space, which then enables or suggests non-phallogentric possibilities.

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<sup>15</sup> I first began to use this term to describe my practice, which was informed by my physical experience and the everyday reality of caring for an infant. I first heard the term when I attended a symposium and practice sharing session at the Institute for the *Art and Practice of Dissent at Home* (2016). Before this, I struggled to fully make sense of the radical nature of my acts, and meeting other mother-artists crystallized the potency of our practice for me. In theoretical terms, in the US since the early 2000s, Andrea Liss has been describing mother artists' practice in this way as a maternal aesthetic. In 2013 the *Studies in the Maternal*, on-line journal, guest curated by Liss, was titled *Maternal Aesthetics: The Surprise of the Real*. It was certainly at this point that I became aware of the resurgent interest in the mother in art and feminism.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida reminds us that what is perceived as fixed is actually indeterminate, and that the effort of imposing, establishing and maintaining binaries is a massive strain that constantly causes itself to collapse, which is essential to my analysis of the latent radical potential of performance-to-camera and the maternal. I do not intend or imply to conflate these two things, and in many ways they are polar opposites. The camera insists on the aforementioned binaries and therefore struggles to maintain these boundaries, particularly in a digitised world. The maternal, however, inherently threatens boundaries as it transgresses the interior and the exterior in its flows (of blood and milk) and metamorphoses (where one becomes two).

The consequence of the ideological, representational, verbal and physical repression of women is arguably the hysteric, irrational or incomprehensible woman:

And anyway why would she not be “hysterical”? Since hysteria holds in reserve, in suspension/ suffering, something in common with the mime [...] the problem is that the ludic mimicry, the fiction, the “make believe,” the “let’s pretend” [...] are stopped short, impeded, *controlled by a master-signifier*, the phallus. [...] (ibid).

This hysteria is stigmatised ‘as a place where fantasies, ghosts, and shadows fester and must be unmasked, interpreted’ (Irigaray, 1985, p. 60). In response to this, Elizabeth Grosz<sup>17</sup> argues that Irigaray proposes a counter-strategy to women’s containment ‘within an image and a logic that renders them mute and hysterical’ (Grosz, 1990, p. 174). Elizabeth Grosz argues that one counter-strategy is to mime, thus displacing ‘the real with simulacrum’ (ibid, p. 174), thus exceeding the ‘patriarchal requirements of femininity’ (ibid). In this thesis, the work I propose and theorise is to some degree defined by this premise; the idea that performance-to-camera is to mime and displace the real and that performance-to-camera with a maternal aesthetic exceeds the ‘patriarchal requirements of femininity’ (ibid).

I will focus on feminist critique of psychoanalytic theory, particularly developmental theories and theories on the maternal. Of particular interest is Alison Stone, whose theories on the maternal and especially mother-daughter relationships have influenced my understanding of my practice (Stone, 2012). Stone argues that ‘the object-relations and Freudian-Lacanian traditions unite in regarding the mother as mere background to the child-as-self’ (Stone, 2012, p. 31). Stone’s criticism of Irigaray’s analysis is that it over-identifies with the figure of the daughter, Stone claims that this renders the mother a reproduction ‘the background to someone else’s narrative - this time [though] the daughter not the son’ (Stone, 2012, p. 60). To be a background is arguably a continuation of a phallocentric perspective, however, in this thesis the critique of phallocentrism and the deployment of maternal aesthetics are in order to develop a subject position for the mother. I have also looked at matrilineal connections, such as my relationship with my grandmother and my mother, and women performing with their sons. However, in the practice I have

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Grosz is part of the 1990s Australian school of Corporeal Feminism that includes Rosi Braidotti.



produced, my main focus has been my relationship with my deceased grandmother and my first-born daughter.

The work submitted with this thesis is centred on two performance-to-camera pieces, both in a locked studio environment and photographed by Duncan in 2010, and 2011-2012<sup>18</sup>. These performances span different concerns elicited by the maternal; the first, *My Nana's Wedding (Gown) (2010) (MNWG)* is concerned with matrilineage and is inter-generational in its approach and subject-matter, while the second series, *My Studio Performances with Matilda*<sup>19</sup> (2011-12) (*MSP with Matilda*), charts the developing relationship and subjectivities and inter-subjectivities<sup>20</sup> between myself and my eldest daughter. In both performances, the notion of interiority and exteriority, both set up (as we shall see via Derrida's parergon, 1987a) and collapsed through the frame, is addressed through invoking the maternal, which both mutates and evolves. Perceptions of the body and subjectivity as isolated entities are upset in pregnancy, and in interactions with infant children, while perceptions of time and space as distinct linear moments from each other are upset in the exchanges across generations that occur in a maternal aesthetic. By invoking the maternal, I am part of the resurgent maternal aesthetic that proposes time as conceived around births rather than deaths, and I choose to recognise the links we have across time through our mothers, and our grandmothers.

My research has been important in a number of ways: my case studies discuss the work of Shirley Cameron and Evelyn Silver, work that has been absent both from mainstream art criticism and canonisation in any sustained feminist theorisations. Simultaneously, through my commitment to a practice-based approach, I have been able to explore the camera and the maternal through acts of performance and notions of spectating. The turn to the maternal aesthetic as a means through which to analyse and contextualise these artists practices, and relate these works to other contemporary performers who operate in a maternal aesthetic, such as Šimić,

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<sup>18</sup> First exhibited as an animation in *Chongqing Cyberspace and the Myth of Gender* (2010), now in the publication; *Cyberspace and the Myth of Gender*, Turner (2010).

<sup>19</sup> Included in the *ProCreate* Archive housed at the Women's Art Library 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Discussed in Chapter Three through Jessica Benjamin's intersubjective developmental theory.

Tracey Kershaw<sup>21</sup> and myself, is not to re-instate biological determinism or essentialist feminist practices, I address this in Chapter Two.

### 3: Literature Review

#### Photography and Reality and the Liveness Debate

In 1983, Czech born philosopher Vilem Flusser, who was heavily influenced by the strand of phenomenology developed by Martin Heidegger that focuses on the ontology of being apprehended through tools, argued that we 'are all inhabitants of the photographic universe [because] we have become accustomed [or naturalised] to photographs' (Flusser, p. 65, 2000). In Flusser's reading of photography, it is possible to observe his deployment of the principle of *enframing*, theorised by Martin Heidegger (1977). Heidegger's notion of *enframing* is apparent in Flusser's argument when he describes the clash of intention between humanity and technology, although it is not something to which he refers specifically.

Heidegger defines the intention of modern technology as an 'unreasonable demand' (Heidegger, 1977, p. 14), in the sense that everything in nature is perceived as of use and disposable to man. Interestingly, this technological intention is a 'setting-upon' (ibid, p. 15) the thing which, Heidegger contends, is an acceleration 'in that it unlocks and exposes' (ibid). I want to relate this notion of unlocking and exposing directly to the camera's ability to hasten the process of revealing. However, there is a deeper level of revealing which Heidegger names 'primally granted revealing' (Heidegger, 1977, p. 34), which refers to a period in ancient Greece when 'it was not just technology alone that bore the name *techne*' (ibid). Photography, when seen as enframing, is not empowering but rather in its ability to expose or reveal can leave us vulnerable, and therefore, if used in the wrong hands or for the wrong purpose, it becomes a tool of control or power. These examples of photographic demonstrate the importance of the photographer's intention when creating an image, as well as

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<sup>21</sup> Šimić works across the disciplines of theatre and fine art. She began making work more specifically in the maternal vein whilst pregnant with her first son. Šimić now has four sons, and is co-founder of *The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home*, with her children and Gary Anderson. Tracy Kershaw is a Nottingham-based artist who has a son and who works in the maternal aesthetic, she is an obsessive collector and hoarder and collects her material from the everyday, from the detritus of domesticity and childcare.

the inherent power in the photograph and the camera. Later, in the same essay, *The Question Concerning Technology* (1977), Heidegger describes this new technological perception (which he calls enframing) as transforming what it has unlocked, then storing it up, then distributing it and then switching it 'about ever anew' (Heidegger, 1977, p. 16).

The camera can be used in a way that completely dismantles Flusser's analysis of its function, heavily reliant as it is with the binary between 'nature' and 'machine'. There are many theories and practices to support this view, and Heidegger argues that 'essential reflection on technology' (Heidegger, 1977, p. 35) and crucially, a 'decisive confrontation with it' (ibid), must occur in a realm that is akin to technology whilst separate from it. There are many examples that are, arguably, striving for this, from Canadian photographer Jeff Wall, discussed by Michael Fried in *Why Photography Matters in Art as Never Before* (Fried, 2008) to the Canadian dancer Susan Kozel's (Kozel, 2010) work with digital images and devices in her performances (in the early 2000s) and her working methodologies grounded in Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>22</sup> and Heidegger's reminder of the time when art was *techne*<sup>23</sup> (Heidegger, 1977, p. 34).

The premise of the Liveness debate in the 1990s was that the digital had usurped the live moment and it marked a second instance of the loss of aura, with the first crisis being loss of aura for the art object in the advent of mechanical reproduction<sup>24</sup>. In a similar way the latter crisis being for the embodied act as auratic rather than the aura of an object. However, Samuel Weber<sup>25</sup> (1996) argued the distancing effect of

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<sup>22</sup> Merleau-Ponty was a French philosopher influenced by Heidegger and Husserl, he philosophised about how meaning is arrived at through experience.

<sup>23</sup> *Techne* is meant to express not just a sense of craftsmanship, but rather in its essence it is a way of knowing. *Techne* from which the word technology is derived was also, in ancient Greek a term which encompassed poetry and the arts. Therefore it implies a deeper form of knowing the world.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin's 1950s seminal essay *The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Weber is a contemporary philosopher who provides good counter arguments to Walter Benjamin's (1999) assertions that reproduction and dissipation through media lessen aura (1996). Benjamin had previously found film lacking because of, interestingly, its estrangement from a live audience (Benjamin, 1999, p. 224). With regard to a methodology of the digital, Steve Dixon (2006) reviews digital performance as a new medium, thereby implying it as an addition to existing creative experimentation and culture as opposed to a lessening of the same. Meanwhile, Susan Broadhurst's work with avatars in the theatre, and her theorising about liminality and indeterminate spaces (1999,

media also creates aura, because an artwork or object, and additionally an art performance or experience, are reliant on a degree of untouchability. In actual fact the untouchability is part of the aesthetic premise that many deem necessary for a work to be classified as fine art. Weber uses film as evidence of the phenomenon of auratic media (Weber, 1996, pp. 101-107) in terms of idolising film stars and so on. Therefore, as it had emerged that aura was not the sole property of presence, or even the sole property of fine art aesthetics, it would be incorrect to claim its loss at the hands of technological mediation or mass media. Weber echoes Heidegger's ideas of oscillations as paradoxical, where he describes a movement between distance and closeness as 'a distance that takes up and moves the beholder towards that which, though remote, is also closest-at-hand' (Weber, 1996, p. 107).

The Liveness debate then led me to consider the idea of a loss of presence. Philip Auslander has written extensively on performance and technology from the 1990s onwards, and he argues that digital media serves to highlight what has always been true, which is that the world is highly mediatised, and this was so prior to the influx of digital media, which has only served to bring this into sharper relief (Auslander, 1999, p. 53). Derrida has also contributed to the theorisation of presence and media, discussing the phantom or ghost to demonstrate that the distinction between absence and presence is not clear-cut, if it can be claimed to exist at all. Are we not, in fact, continually in the act of coming into presence? (Derrida, 1981, p. 215). Performance embodies this transience, whether live or on film.

The notion of embodiment, and seeing the body as reconfigured through technology, rather than removed or marginalised also counters postmodern conceptions of the absence of the body. Feminist inquiry has been active in this area, in particular, ideas of hybridity and cyber-Goddesses as theorised by Donna Haraway<sup>26</sup> (1991, p. 150), and notions of the body as fully present in technology and culture. Haraway's

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2006) is an example of the trend towards viewing the camera and digital techniques as fully present often through using technology in a very immersive way.

<sup>26</sup> Donna Haraway is part of the techno-embodied branch of feminism that was utopian in nature and prevalent in the 1990s, her work intersects with theorists such as Sadie Plant (1997). They both argued that the internet was very liberating for women, and that women's involvement in and use of technology is culturally played down.

ideas have been key in the ongoing relevance of a feminist aesthetic, which embraces the technological whilst concurrently placing the body as critical and central to any engagement with culture. It is clear that technology is not a form of loss because, as Heidegger argues, technology is in essence a mode of accessing the world, and it is through tools that we experience. This assertion that technology is not a form of loss is also evidenced by Weber's work (1996), in which he examines how aura operates in works of art to show, for example, the auratic properties of film.

#### **4: The Gaze, Feminist Theory and Essentialism**

Flusser's analysis is dated, partly because it predates the digital, which in many ways upsets further the rigid notion of the frame and binary distinctions. However, what is less destabilised from the move from analogue to digital is the function of the specular device and its deployment as a tool to enforce conformity, and this is another frame. It is in this internal frame, the space where images are conceptually and symbolically constructed, that those artists who declare their feminist politics or have been defined as such by others, have employed irony and satire, mimicry and hysteria to exploit the ambiguous nature of the photograph and its implicit destabilisations of the real.

The nature of spectatorship, particularly the in-built culturally-primed capacity in the West to distance oneself as a spectator, becomes a central concern. Working solely within the photographic space cannot unravel the relationship of gaze and photography and their function within representation. For Lacanian feminist theorist, Kaja Silverman (writing in the 1990s), the camera conflates or interchanges with the male gaze. Indeed, she argues that camera and gaze are one and the same in Lacan's theorisation (Silverman, 1996, pp. 132-133). This, I would argue, constitutes an internal failure in performance-to-camera as an effective critique of the objectification that the camera helps to facilitate. Nevertheless, it is this very impossibility that has created such interesting processes as in Stehli's performance, *Friends with Benefits* (2000)<sup>27</sup>. The link between camera and gaze has now become over-determined and it is difficult to structure a feminist critique of representation that does not include this or allude to its capacity to create and maintain alterity.

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<sup>27</sup> Which I will discuss in Chapter One

Silverman argues that with the advent of the camera, the eye is no longer perceived as accurate. Rather, it is seen to be housed in the body and thereby subject to error, fatigue, misperception, interpretation, and so on<sup>28</sup>. Silverman then links this emphatic insistence 'on the disjunction of camera and eye' (Silverman, 1996, p. 131) with Lacan's positing in *The Four Fundamental Concepts* (1977a) that the camera signifies the gaze (ibid). Elizabeth Grosz concurs with Silverman's view that Lacan clearly aligns camera and gaze, while Grosz states that for Lacan:

[...] the possibility of being observed is always primary. To occupy a place in the scopic field is to be able to see, but more significantly, to be seen. The gaze is what ensures that when I see, at the same time, "I am *photo-graphed*" (Lacan, 1977a, p. 106).

The ramifications of the gaze being linked to the camera are that the inherent potential for control can easily be taken away, witnessed in the desire to be seen and shown, as well as to see, which, according to Lacan, is required for a fully-fledged subjectivity and is provided via the camera. The authority of owning or operating the device is evidenced in the following recollection, made by bell hooks<sup>29</sup> (Wells, 2003, p. 391), that it was her father who was the only one with access to the equipment when she was growing up, and as hooks explains, 'he exerted control over our image' (Wells, 2003, p. 391). Her father would line them all up, and as hooks remembers, 'I hated it. I hated posing. I hated cameras. I hated the images they produced' (Wells, 2003, p. 392). For hooks, patriarchy and 'picture takin [sic]' (Wells, 2003, p. 391) were always inherently linked from her childhood onwards.

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<sup>28</sup> The camera has been linked to the progression that began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the advent of the stereoscope, where a 'dramatic disjunction of eye and optical apparatus' occurs (Silverman, 1996, p. 129). Further to this Silverman argues that the stereoscope 'calls into question the very distinction [...] between the look and the object' (ibid).

<sup>29</sup> bell hooks is a contemporary black American feminist cultural theorist and campaigner. She argues many points, including that patriarchy damages men and boys as much as women, and that visual culture is constantly assaulting feminism. Refer to, for example, *Beyoncé is a Terrorist* (hooks, 2014).

When women photograph their children, there is often a negative reception from the conservative elements in wider society. Sally Mann and Tierney Gearon<sup>30</sup>, as well as Shirley Cameron and Grace Surman are all used to examine and provide evidence of this phenomenon. John Berger's<sup>31</sup> argument still resonates, which is that the 'essential way of seeing women' (Berger, 2008, p. 64), and 'the essential use to which their images are put' (ibid), has not changed, and I would add cannot change, because 'the ideal spectator is always assumed to be male' (ibid). This goes some way towards explaining why online networking/ dating and selfie culture can be so disempowering, even if that assertion is at odds with the myth that we are all freer on the Internet. Further to this, Lutz and Collins<sup>32</sup> argue that the 'photographer's gaze [...] leaves its clear mark on the structure and content of the photograph' (Lutz and Collins, 1993, p. 355). In this instance, there is a desperate need to be seen, or an overwhelming desire for control, which is arguably the subtext for many representations. With these concerns in mind, and my need to satirise the perceived desperation of women to be seen and approved of, I constructed the performance-to-camera *MNWG* (2010) in such a way as to restrict the photographer's control, whilst presenting to the spectator a 'hysterical woman'. The photographer chooses when to activate the shutter, thus mirroring his gaze back to us, similarly to Lutz and Collins argument that the photographer always does almost in spite of himself. The photographer reveals himself through his choices of when to press the shutter and that exposes them. I did not discuss this with Duncan, nor did he know prior to the

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<sup>30</sup> Mann and Gearon are both photographers who work with their families to create images that are often taboo or aim to challenge myths about family life, they are both contemporary although better known in the late 1990s early 2000s.

<sup>31</sup> Berger is responsible for the, what is now, deemed seminal book on the relationship between gender, hierarchy, power and visual culture. It began as a series of television programmes in the late 1970s broadcast on the BBC and was subsequently published in print.

<sup>32</sup> Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, both associate professors in visual anthropology, actually theorise there are 7 ways of looking associated with photography they theorise the photograph as an intersection of gazes (Lutz and Collins, 1993, p. 354) and make the claim that 'all photographs tell stories about looking' (ibid). These gazes are:

1. The photographer's gaze
2. The institutional, magazine gaze
3. The readers' gaze
4. The non-Western subjects' gaze
5. The explicit looking done by Westerners who are often framed together with locals in the picture
6. The gaze returned or refracted by the mirrors or cameras that are shown, in a surprising number of photographs, in local hands
7. Our own, academic gaze.

They argue that the camera mirrors the gaze of the photographer and returns it to the viewer (Lutz and Collins, 1993).

‘shoot’ what I was going to do. He was simply instructed not to move the camera from the position we had first agreed, and in this way, at the time, I thought that the gaze could be disrupted. However, by operating a stills camera, rather than a video camera, Duncan retained control over which moment to release the shutter and thereby imprinted his gaze upon the work. Irigaray discusses women’s containment and this reverberates around in this work, she explains it thus, woman is ‘[...] a mirror in which the “subject” sees himself and reproduces himself in his reflection, a shutter set up to allow the eye to frame its view’ (Irigaray, 1985, p. 240).

Therefore, I would argue, that Duncan’s collaboration in the creation of these images is symbolic as well as practical; he not only symbolises the reality of phallocentric dominance over representation, he also, in a literal sense is the man who takes the pictures. There are similarities, here, between my performance and Stehli’s process in *Friends with Benefits* (2000). The act of releasing the shutter is part of the work and renders the photographer vulnerable. Stehli takes this to its extreme by making the photographer literally the subject.

Performance-to-camera is influenced by the perceptual shift that enabled the photographic image to be revealed as a construct, we tend to ‘speak of *taking* photographs rather than *making* them’ (Wells, 1996, p. 95). Women’s performance-to-camera is often at pains to reveal the photograph as a construct to highlight phallocentrism,<sup>33</sup> and, simultaneously, this type of performance is also interested in the camera’s ability to act as a tool for fantasy and make-believe. However critical or playful these performances may be, they tend to be explicitly *made* rather than simply *taken*<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Artist such as Valie Export, Ana Mendieta, Judy Chicago, Rose English, Monica Ross, Shirley Cameron, Evelyn Silver, Dawn Woods, Amalia Ulman, Francesca Woodman.

<sup>34</sup> In Chapter’s Two and Three, I argue that maternal aesthetics overcomes these difficulties by situating itself firmly in the experiential and the maternal, and in this way, the camera is restructured as a space for autonomy and intersubjectivity; rather than as a symbolic stand-in for patriarchal oppression.



## 5: The Artists, Shirley Cameron and Lena Šimić, and my own maternal practice and performance-to-camera methodology

In 1974, sculptor and performance artist, Shirley Cameron gave birth to twin daughters Lois and Colette. She began to perform again three weeks after their birth, as she was on tour, with a performance called *Rabbits* (1974), performed with husband Roland Miller at agricultural shows. Cameron had conceived of this performance as preparation for having a baby and performed inside a house/hutch with live rabbits. Similar to most first-time mothers, Cameron hoped that the baby would fit into her life, which in this instance was her lifestyle of touring with Miller, and that its arrival would not alter things too significantly. However, this was not to be as, unbeknownst to her, she was carrying twins. Central to the maternal aesthetic is how radically babies and children change us and our lives, while the art is not a by-product of having children. Mother-artists practicing maternal aesthetics are often exploring the metaphysics of the radical changes that have occurred in their lives. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, Cameron continued to collaborate with Miller, with her daughters, with Evelyn Silver, and with other artists, such as Angela Carter, and she has been a very prolific performer.

The link between mimesis and irony as a radical act, which I have cited as a common thread in feminist performance, is clear in Cameron and Carter's performance with Cameron's daughters *Washing the Twins* (1977), in which Carter washed a bronze statue of a pair of twins while Cameron washed her own girls in a bowl in front of the sculpture. When I recorded Cameron (who is now in her seventies) for my Oral Histories<sup>35</sup>, she explained how such an act was deemed irreverent to art at the time it was performed. This irreverence, or de-legitimisation of authority through the act of mimesis, is also apparent in Cameron and Silver's other collaborations, both in their interventions in the everyday and their treatment of avant-garde performance. For example, in their performance *The Swinging Sixties*:

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<sup>35</sup> Available in the Appendix to this thesis as **oral recordings**, rather than as transcribed interviews, as they follow the format of a facilitated conversation rather than a formal interview. Through existing as recordings, the presence of the artists is emphasised and reference made to non-academic forms of intergeneration, and specifically to matrilineal knowledge transfer. A useful reference for the use of facilitation in conversation is Lois Weaver's *Long Table Discussions* (ongoing). I recently participated in one of these discussions on the topic of the family at Tate Modern's Fierce Play family festival (2018).

*We Were There* (1993), they positively reclaim the Yves Klein style bodies and paint performances of the 1960s<sup>36</sup>. Cameron and Silver also parodied the British royal family and religion, in particular the iconic figures of Princess Diana and the Virgin Mary, as well as certain conceptions of femininity. For example, they were inspired by the Victorian era paintings of women in corsets and long gowns climbing mountains. Their works succeeded as radical and transformative because they were always enacted in community settings, such as parks, public houses, on the street, public squares, monuments, factory doors, schools, community centres, and so on, and this commitment to reach audiences of women who would not necessarily be 'art aware' was to further feminist goals of empowerment and raise consciousness, as well as being non-elitist. If members of the audience asked them what was happening, or why they were there, they would answer to the best of their ability, as their aim was to communicate and not be overly abstract. Through humour, they sought to highlight some of the absurdities of phallocentrism. This is never more apparent than in *Brides Against the Bomb* (1982-1985 Fig. 1), which was performed at a variety of locations including the Glastonbury festival.



Fig. 1. *Brides Against The Bomb*, Evelyn Silver and Shirley Cameron, (1982- 1985).

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<sup>36</sup> This will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Two.

Their ambivalence towards the institution of marriage is clear in the act of wearing wedding dresses while demonstrating for nuclear disarmament. Posing as figures of a phallocratic establishment, and protesting with a wedding cake in a pram, communicates an image of mothers who, we can assume, want a safe(r) world for their children. Essentially, the wedding dresses evoke a normative femininity as a parody, similar to that which I invoke when performing with my Nana's dress. This is an aesthetic that inevitably clashes with phallogentric logic, because it presents a different set of ethical concerns. My work contrasts, because I have no clear message, but rather I present an abstraction of loss that is partly the lack of a clear cause. Cameron and Silver are happily, albeit ironically, wearing the dresses to perform what becomes a radical gesture in the clash between the patriarchal establishment and the maternal, presented in the form of wives and mothers who also want peace. My dress, on the other hand, is mysterious and unknown/unknowable, but it entices and leads to jouissance. Silver and Cameron reappropriate the wedding dress and the wedding ritual as an empowering symbol of women's political activism, whereas in my performance, *MNWG* (2010), I cannot even fit into the dress my Nana wore as if women have altered so radically in the intervening time. It was these reflections on the historic performance of Cameron and Silver and their use of wedding dresses (Fig. 1) which led me to understand that, when maternal performance occurs, it tends to be interventionist and reflexive upon existing institutions and, what I describe as phallogentrism, following after Irigaray (1974), Kristeva (1984) and Cavarero (1995). In making the link between myself and Cameron as sharing a maternal aesthetic in our performing with our daughters, this thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge because there exists only a minimal amount of research into women's performance with their daughters, and Cameron's work has never been analysed in this way. In addition, Silver appeared in performances with Cameron and her daughters, and also invoked maternal aesthetics through the matrilineal in her own work.

I recently attended symposium on the topic of 'motherhood and live art'<sup>37</sup>, at which I presented *MSP with Matilda* (2011-12). There was discussion around what

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<sup>37</sup> LADA, *Study Room in Exile* (2016) hosted by *The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home*, Lena Šimić.

constitutes a maternal aesthetic. During the course of the discussion at the Institute the mother artist manifesto by Mierle Laderman Ukeles made in 1969 emerged as important to all of the artists gathered there. The manifesto is concerned with what constitutes work and what is of cultural value in Western capitalist culture, and there were many other important connections, such as isolation, time constraints, ambivalence, and questioning of the role of the mother. In Šimić and Emily Underwood-Lee's<sup>38</sup> study guide on live art and motherhood for their LADA archive, where my performance-to-camera *MNWG* (2010) is now held, they pinpoint many themes connected to the maternal. These include: resistance as well as conformity, eroticism, time, play, ethics and generations (Šimić & Underwood-Lee, 2016).

Lena Šimić's practice differs from Cameron's because, apart from the historical context differing, Šimić takes the outsider position in her status as a non-British mother. The outsider position enables her to destabilise conceptions about her identity as a mother, as a woman and as an artist. Šimić's practice also differs from Cameron's maternal practice, because it is consciously interventionist in its nature (Cameron went on to produce interventionist work when her twins were older and she collaborated with Silver). When Šimić described the early days with a baby or infant and trying to make art at the Live Art and Motherhood Symposium (2016)<sup>39</sup>, Cameron and Šimić sound very similar in their pragmatic attitude towards their child's presence in their work. From my own experience, I know that there have been times when considering the presence of my children has directly affected the work. For both Cameron<sup>40</sup> and Šimić, and for myself, this has resulted in creative responses and interesting collaborations. For example, Šimić has continued to work with her four sons at different points and on different projects over the years, including: *mother & son: 'that just sounds really sad'* artist residency and performance with Neal Anderson (2011), *Friday Records: A Document of Maternity Leave* blog (with baby James, 2014) and *Sid Jonah Anderson by Lena Šimić* (2008).

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<sup>38</sup> Underwood-Lee is a maternal artist and collaborates with Šimić on theorising the maternal aesthetic.

<sup>39</sup> Documentation can be viewed on *The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home's* website.

<sup>40</sup> Cameron produced over twenty performances with her daughters.

## 6: From Motherhood to the Maternal

I am working within the framework of a maternal aesthetics, which is, I argue, in concurrence with current feminist theory, and which is a state described by Emily Jeremiah<sup>41</sup> as one that involves ‘change and exchange’ (Jeremiah, 2006, p. 23). She further argues that the shift in feminist theory towards discussing the role of ‘mothering’ rather than ‘the mother’ (Jeremiah, 2006, p. 21) is parallel to the shift from ‘essentialism to poststructuralism’ that feminism, more broadly, has experienced (ibid). Jessica Benjamin<sup>42</sup> (1990) argues that mothering is relational, Benjamin’s analysis, according to Jeremiah, is based on the assumption that women know innately how to care, and this is therefore an essentialist viewpoint (Jeremiah, 2006). Instead, Jeremiah chooses, to theorise the maternal as ‘performative’ (Jeremiah, 2006, p. 21). In a similar vein, Šimić and Underwood-Lee distinguish between motherhood as direct experience and the maternal as the theoretical and aesthetic dimensions (Šimić and Underwood-Lee, 2017).

I do not concur with Jeremiah that Benjamin’s theory is essentialist in nature, because her theory of the maternal stems from the notion of the relational, an exchange between others that can be nothing other than performative. Therefore, how can it be claimed that she implies a static, fixed, or essentialised subject? Benjamin proposes that to be a mother is to improvise and always be actively creative, to take the time to recognise the other and help them to recognise you and find ‘the joy in the [...] recognition of shared reality’ (Benjamin, 1990, p. 41). To suggest that women can mother instinctively does sound alarmingly essentialist, however, I interpret Benjamin’s argument as being that the instinct is to improvise, and this is not necessarily gendered. The conception of what the mother is and what her role is hinges on the developmental theory to which you ascribe. For Benjamin ‘internalisation theory and intersubjective theory are not mutually exclusive’ (Benjamin, 1990, p. 45) I discuss Benjamin’s theory in relation to *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012) in more depth in Chapters’ Two and Three.

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<sup>41</sup> Jeremiah, who is Professor of Contemporary Literature and Gender Studies at Royal Holloway, University of London, is critical of essentialism in feminist theory.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin is one of the leading psychoanalysts currently working in the field, and is the founder of relational theory. She practices in New York. I make use of her theory on intersubjectivity later in this thesis to better understand the dynamics at play between myself and Matilda in our studio performances *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012).

The notion of the role of mothering empowering and developing the other's agency is radically different to the concept of the mother as becoming an internalised mental structure for the child, and recognising the mother as a subject is not the same as internalising an image of the mother as an object (Benjamin, 2006, p. 3). The ground-breaking work of child developmental psychologist Donald Winnicott in the 1970s, broke with the view of the mother as passive and consumable. Benjamin argues that, in *Playing and Reality* (1971) Winnicott appears to lay the foundations for her relational model by using such terms as "the holding environment" and the "facilitating environment" (Benjamin quoting Winnicott, 1990, p.44). Jeremiah however, is not alone in taking issue with the term 'motherhood.' Many feminist thinkers, from Irigaray to Kristeva and Stone, share her caution. When motherhood refers to a phallocentric idealisation of femininity, and further to this, proposes a rigid conception of what each gender is capable of and assigned to do it becomes problematic.

I think to clarify my position, and the methodology I have employed, it is important to look to the feminist philosophy of Stone (2012) and Sara Ruddick (1990). In what Jeremiah would probably describe as a poststructuralist move, (although she cites neither Ruddick nor Stone). Stone writes about 'maternal experience' (Stone, 2012, pp. 20-30), and Ruddick about 'maternal practice', 'maternal thinking' and 'maternal work' (Ruddick, 1990, pp. 17-29). These ways of discussing mothering can overcome the difficulties of biologically derived pigeonholing and generalisations about gender identity, as well as counter criticisms about definitions of motherhood that exclude all those who have not carried and given birth to a child. Maternal aesthetics can also be added to the above as a way of thinking about motherhood and mothering in a way that does not seek to essentialise or biologically dictate its role or experience.

I would argue that one of the ways that women's performance-to-camera becomes vital once more is when a maternal aesthetic is utilised, because in this context a woman's subjective position has been both threatened and renegotiated (Stone,

2012, pp. 21-33). Stone is unapologetic in her discussion of mothering and how the experience of being a daughter or a mother (or both) intersect with feminine subjectivity. Even in the 1990s, when Ruddick was discussing *maternal work* as opposed to *mothers*, she stresses the importance of honouring the maternal work (and by that she means child-bearing and the bulk of the childcare) that women have done throughout history (Ruddick, 1990, p. 44), and distinguishes birth work (labour) as distinct and, significantly, performed by women exclusively. On birth, Ruddick argues that as 'long as we fear and deny the distinctly female character of birth, we risk losing the symbolic, emotional, and ultimately political significance of birth' (ibid, p. 49). In accordance with Jessica Benjamin, in Chapter Three, I argue, for the mother as initiating an intersubjective process. The maternal, in my practice, has become a means through which to challenge notions of lack, excess and separation, and it is also concerned with questioning binaries. It moves through time both inter-generationally and cyclically, and apprehends being through the intersubjective. Here, the interaction of mother and child in frames will be considered alongside argumentation for the maternal as a resistant strategy when deployed aesthetically.

## 7: Research Questions and Thesis Structure

The thesis examines historic performance-to-camera, juxtaposing this with the lesser theoretically articulated practice of British performance, with the artists Shirley Cameron and Evelyn Silver, and with the contemporary practices of academic and artist/activist Lena Šimić, and my own practice in the maternal. My aim is to assign new significance to these practices, often confined within the context of community arts, or women's peace or feminist movements, by placing them within the emerging field of maternal aesthetics. For this thesis I am submitting personal practice, made within the last six years, addressing inter-generational and maternal themes performed solely within the photograph.

The research reviews and utilises some of the theories and philosophies of feminist theorists, including Luce Irigaray, Alison Stone, Jessica Benjamin and Jacques Derrida. Artworks include work produced by Lena Šimić, Evelyn Silver, Shirley Cameron, Lindsey Page and Jemima Stehli. The first-hand research material also includes oral history recordings of Evelyn Silver, Shirley Cameron, Tracey Kershaw and Sam Rose, made in 2015 and 2016. My practice submissions, *MNWG* (2010), and *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012), explore notions of agency and the frame through performance in a photographic studio where the only other players are the cameraman played by Alan Duncan, and in the latter, my daughter and Duncan and myself. I draw parallels between my process and the wider context of feminist concerns with participation and spectatorship, which can be used to expose the male gaze, explore feminine subjectivity and expose the constructed nature of gender binaries. Stehli's *Friends with Benefits* (2000) is a good example of this deployment of performance-to-camera as a critique of the camera's role in objectification.

I argue that there is a relationship between Derrida's assertion (Derrida, 1987a, p. 75) that the frame destabilises itself and feminist experimentation with performance-to-camera, which I maintain is implicitly critical of the implied passivity of the represented subject through the destabilisation of the camera's omnipresence. However, this issue of agency and autonomy is troubled within the maternal, where the infant child is not able to consent. I explore this through discussion of Cameron's caged performances (1974-77) with her twin daughters, and through Lena Šimić's performance with her son, *Sid Jonah Anderson* (2008), and my own performances with Matilda (2011-ongoing, and now including Agnes).



Does photography empower the subject, and, furthermore, are feminist interventions in photography, subsequently described in this thesis as performance-to-camera, a failed critique?

In Chapter One, I argue that the many feminist interventions that have occurred within avant-garde performance and live art practices are ultimately unsuccessful as gestures that endure over time, because the camera and the fine art context in which they are placed enforce, or take the image back into, a phallogentric frame. That is one where the subject-matter is heavily aestheticised and over formed, rendering it a distant detached object rather than one which is more chaotic or emotional.

My aim is to explore performance-to-camera within the context of feminist theory, particularly the hostile relationship that women have had with the camera and the subsequent therapeutic nature of performance brought to bear on the photographic space. In this chapter, I will contextualise the complications and discrepancies that arise within feminist performance and theory that specifically seeks to destabilise binary thought, particularly the loss or lack of agency and essentialist feminist viewpoints. This chapter also provides more of an overview of feminist critiques of representation, and women's attempts to 'break in' to the art world, which is directly related to the broader project of visibility and autonomy, as well as agency, which has concerned, and continues to, concern feminism, both theoretically and practically. I am curious as to why so many feminist performers have decided to use a camera if the gaze is so problematic?

I will establish links between the camera and theorisations of the gaze, and power and control, through looking and objectification, while also presenting the conflicting nature of the camera, which on the one hand opens communication channels and facilitates inter-subjectivity within fine art performance while, on the other hand, controls, scrutinises and oppresses. In this chapter I will also begin to juxtapose my practice with others who have worked in front of the camera, and with ideas about what the camera does to subjectivity. The performances I submit explore levels of control and access which the camera both allows and denies, and I discuss this interplay in relation to broader aspects of feminist critique.

How can representing mother-daughter relationships re-invigorate women's performance-to-camera in the light of the failure of historical feminist interventions to successfully oppose the maintenance of dualistic thought?

What relationship does Irigaray's conception of the blind spot or reverse of the image and women's excess have to performance-to-camera and Derrida's parergon?

In Chapter Two, I discuss the potency of mother-daughter relationships as a radical re-think of prevalent Western aesthetics. The emphasis on mothering, encompasses its transitional nature and culminates in representations of an intersubjective quality, which are used to employ, and to reflect and comment on, the experience of mother-daughter relationships and their effect on destabilising traditional aesthetics and representation. My aim is to converge the maternal with the camera, to explore subjectivity in the context of phallogentrism. Of interest are the binaries of active/passive and looker and looked upon, and the role of performer and spectator within that ideological duality. In for example, Cameron's series of caged performances (*Enmeshed*, 1974 and *Cages*, 1977) performed with her daughters, she is able to literalise and exemplify the violence of the act of framing and the vulnerability of the feminine subject when objectified through the motif of the cage.

I am concerned with what occurs at that moment when the frame finishes, before that (which we call reality, thought of here ironically as un-aestheticised matter) has yet to happen, theorised through Derrida's parergon and the subsequent collapse of binary distinctions. I argue that the role of the camera operator, the maintenance of a separation between subject(s) and spectator(s) presents a microcosm of oppressive systems that internally deconstructs itself through the sheer amount of effort taken to uphold the boundary. Woman, particularly the maternal body, but also the body that bleeds, the body that excretes, also exceeds boundaries; in this instance, the boundary of the interior/exterior of the body. This excess cannot be tamed by the frame alone because of its internal instability and also because of ideas of seepage and overflow elicited in the symbolic penetration of the female form. The notion of a reverse or underbelly and the collapse of an interior and exterior space between

mother and infant all conjure up the Irigarayan inverted specular dimension, where arguably femininity resides, if such a thing exists.

Can performance-to-camera be a relational process that facilitates subjectivity when maternal aesthetics is invoked? Does this emphasis on inter-subjective process create a maternal space where performance and art-making can be acts of care?

In Chapter Three, I consider how far it can be claimed that the maternal overturns or disrupts thousands of years of phallogocentric ideology. I look at the role of care and the ethical frameworks where children have collaborated, or have been co-opted, in performance with their mothers. Maternal aesthetics is deployed as a term which conceptually, figuratively and literally involves one's children in artistic production. It is more than just a pragmatic decision, it is metaphysically challenging to notions of individualism and agency, and in this way the maternal is theorised by feminist philosophers as not merely resistant to the residues of phallogocentrism that we may encounter within philosophy. Indeed, culture or social contexts render these structures irrelevant. Conversely, the over-determination of the maternal and the feminine is also a phallogocentric myth, where woman is assigned as matter or material in her function as bearer of children. However, when maternal aesthetics is deployed consciously, it tends to act as a discursive tool which can expose this myth as a construct, a good example of which is Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1976), where the mother-child relationship is aestheticised and conceptualised to render it elevated from the everyday, thus emphasising its importance.

## 8: Methodology and Outline of my Practice

My methodology is a reciprocal critical engagement where the practice tests the theory and the theory tests the practice. To answer my research questions, my methodology combines performance-to-camera with maternal aesthetics, which, I argue, in the first instance, is a continuation of the feminist critique of women's representational lack through what Irigaray, Kristeva and Stone have identified as a matricidal urge in our culture.

Irigaray has argued that women's erasure and repression is a by-product of our Western phallocratic order, but Irigaray's use of the term 'phallocentrism' is not simply to describe the psychoanalytic 'over-valuation of the male sex organ' (Grosz, 1990, p. 174); it is also describing the 'submersion of women's autonomy' (ibid). In Irigaray's theorisation, phallocentrism occurs when difference is suppressed, when 'sexual symmetries are represented by one'<sup>43</sup> (Grosz, ibid). Similar to classifications of gender and maternalism, the history of representation and aesthetics and the material use to which women's bodies have been put in art, such as Yves Klein's rendering of the female body; discussed in Chapter Two, can be seen as part of a broader oppressive trend that 'submerges women's autonomy' (Grosz, ibid).

Stone radicalises the field of maternal aesthetics through theorising, in particular, on mother-daughter relations, discussed further in Chapter Two. Whilst Benjamin provides an ethical framework for my maternal practice. The aim is to take a non-dominant approach guided by the proposition that a space can be opened up where intersubjectivity can occur. Irigaray, meanwhile, offers the overarching view of why performance in the maternal is vital and radical, and Sara Ruddick can address concerns with regard to the dangers of over-gendering roles (for example the mother as a solely feminine position). My practice is a challenge to essentialism through its specificity; I represent myself and my daughter and I do not speak for other mothers. In the first piece I have submitted, *MNWG* (2010), I purposely fail in my attempt to

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<sup>43</sup> Overly gendering the maternal or confining it as the sole property of women can therefore also be construed as repressive. Women may not want to perform those roles and, concurrently, mothering may be performed by a man or an individual who is either moving between genders (transgender) or gender non-specific (non-binary). The very act of defining and confining gender in a binary way is arguably itself an act of phallocentrism.

present a universal femininity; that is the notion that women have a collective identity<sup>44</sup>.

I am not discussing femininity or gender specifically here, but rather the encounter of the maternal as mythology, aesthetic, structure, institution, role and performance, and how this impacts on mine and my daughter's subjectivity. I address this problem through the use of irony and stereotype, in this instance playing the hysterical bride as discussed in Chapter One. I want to move forward from the initial performance-to-camera critiques of the camera as 'inflictor of the male gaze' and oppressor, such as in earlier works, for example, by Cuban artist Mendieta in the 1970s.

In Chapter Two, this thesis will focus on the frame and Derrida's deconstructive exercise on aesthetics through deploying the parergon, and how this interplays with feminist performances-to-camera as challenging to binary and aesthetic distinctions. The maternal proposes a subjective position that is reliant on inter-subjectivity rather than dominance, where self and other interact through play, and this is posited as a direct challenge to the artist as expert or observer, or the performer as storyteller or as a characterisation to a passive viewer.

*MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012) was made with my daughter Matilda, and to me she symbolises, in part, the encroachment of the everyday into aesthetics. My bare legs and red shoes are seen against the black drapes of the studio and I am falling back against the fabric, which makes a sensuous image because I am seducing the viewer lying back and opening my legs. Then, a baby crawls into the frame, and I would argue that this disrupts the process whereby the spectator consumes the image uncritically, thus offering an alternative commentary on phallocentric objectification. The mother, whilst providing care for a child, is not available to 'service every need' of the viewer, and to pursue this metaphor of need and caring,

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<sup>44</sup> Kristeva connects ideas of essentialism and conforming to the patriarchal impulse to maintain female heterosexuality. Indeed, Stone argues that Kristeva's theoretical framework is centred on how patriarchy fosters female heterosexuality (Stone, 2012, p. 96) and this is Judith Butler's assertion, that the term woman is too normative, as is the term mother.

the images remain in some ways impenetrable because mother and child are absorbed in each other and, therefore, appear to care little for cameraman or viewer. I have heard the comment 'nice image, shame about the baby in the corner' from a spectator (a woman in this instance), whilst other viewers have said that 'Matilda steals the show.' Here I am either performing motherhood badly or performing the subject of the photograph badly; probably both. Conceptually, there is an awareness on my part of the potential reaction of a gendered viewer, and a desire on my part to subvert any pleasure that might be derived from consuming me as an object. The baby in this composition also serves the purpose of drawing the viewer back to the frame's existence because often my daughter is crawling in or out. These performances are configured around the aspect of play, which is one interpretation of how 'givens' can be utilised in the maternal aesthetic as discussed in Chapter Two. Even more interesting and compelling in this context, is Marianne Hirsch's<sup>45</sup> argument that the camera could become an instrument of play and symbolisation (Hirsch, 1997, 1999). From re-thinking the camera as playful<sup>46</sup>, rather than coldly mechanical and controlling, led me to associate my practice with the idea of a therapeutic application for photography<sup>47</sup>. However, my focus is the disruption that matrilineal representations create within a phallogentric logic, and in this incarnation the camera becomes an aid and an amplifier to this critique and exploration.

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<sup>45</sup> Hirsch is a professor of literature at Columbia University in America. She was born in Romania and then immigrated to America in her early teens. In the early nineteen nineties, she introduced the term post-memory, which theorises the collective experience of pain passed on intergenerationally and affecting those who didn't live through the initial trauma.

<sup>46</sup> Vito Acconci's *Conversions* (1971) takes advantage of camera angles to play a game with the viewer and challenge their perception about Acconci's gender. This performance-to-camera remains troubling as the woman whose mouth concealed his penis from the viewer, only half visible as she remains on all fours behind him, has never been granted a subject position in this work. It is still unclear who she actually was as her identity was never revealed. Is this another example of a woman being callously used as material in a male aesthetic process? Or is Acconci making a brutally honest commentary on the ethical problem of being a male artist who encounters the world as mere material to form?

<sup>47</sup> Where Jo Spence's Phototherapy in the 1980s sets the precedent.

## **9: Instructions to Reader**

I ask that you now view the submitted practice and listen to the oral history recordings before reading any further, these can be accessed via a memory stick held at Loughborough University library. The performance-to-camera pieces are comprised of hundreds of images because of the nature of their production with a high shutter speed rate camera. In addition, I have taken a stop frame animation approach with several of the sequences to better explore the interactions between frames. The oral histories are audio recordings where I am in conversation with artists Cameron, Silver, Kershaw and Rose, and they provide invaluable context to my thesis; there are three in total and I ask that you listen to them in full.

# Chapter 1: Women's Performance-to-Camera and its Deactivation as Feminist Critique of the Male Gaze

## 1:1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter, is, firstly, to foreground my own practice within the context of feminist theory and, secondly, to explore its connection to the camera and the photograph as ways of seeing and presenting the self. In this chapter I am addressing the research question; does photography empower the subject, or conversely, are feminist interventions in photography, subsequently described in this thesis as performance-to-camera, a failed critique? On the one hand, within feminist critique that ranges from the 1970s to the present day, the camera and photographic image are viewed as inherently problematic, owing to their construction and maintenance of a mode of looking that has been aligned with patriarchal dominance (Laura Mulvey, 1975, Susan Sontag, 1977, Kaja Silverman, 1996, Vivien Sobchack, 2004). On the other hand, the camera presents the promise of visibility and autonomy to women artists, more specifically, it grants a space that women can occupy and can enable representational agency.

This chapter will explore some of the issues and contradictions that arise out of women's performance-to-camera when they are considered as a critique of phallogentric representation. This type of critique I assert ranges from the photography of Hannah Cullwick, a domestic servant from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to self-proclaimed feminist Stehli's performance in the 2000s. Cullwick staged 'self-portraits,' whereby she re-imagined herself in other roles and subjectivities, such as a chimney sweep, while Stehli is critical of the representation of a passive feminine subject, as can be seen, for example, in Stehli's mimetic performances of Allen Jones's sculptures<sup>48</sup>. In between these artists is a rich and diverse history of

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<sup>48</sup> *RA Allen Jones Exhibition*, (2014-15), was advertised as a major appraisal of his artistic career that spans over fifty years (he was born in 1937). Art critic Martin Gayford interviewed Jones at the time (2014) of the 'appraisal,' in that interview Jones explains that his aim was to 'shock the art world' (Gayford, 2014) and, talking specifically about the *Chair* sculpture (1969), which is now part of the permanent Pop Art Collection at Tate Britain that the fact it became a great image for feminism (Gayford, 2014) was incidental. In this article, that is part of the Royal Academies website, Gayford explains that Jones draws on a vein of 1960s fashion dubbed kinky when creating his sculptures of women (ibid). Many critics have critiqued Jones' work as 'glorifying the objectification of women' (Gayford, 2014). However, critic Jonathan Jones has argued the opposite, claiming instead that the *Chair* and *Hat Stand* sculptures are cynical jokes about the power of sexual desire aimed at rendering the sexual freedoms of the late 1960s as absurd (Gayford, 2014). The power of whose



intervention, which includes the 1970s period, where artists such as Joan Jonas's work with mirrors replicates similar concerns of power through looking for example, in *Mirror Piece I* (1969). The presence of the shadowy figure of the photographer in Jonas's *Organic Honey Vertical Roll* (1973) that renders observer observed, pre-dates Stehli's use of the displacement of power in the representation of the photographer within the image I will discuss this further below.

Ana Mendieta's 1970s performances-to-camera, particularly her transformations into a masculine subject in, for example, *Facial Hair Transplant* (1972), are also arguably, connected to a wider phallocentric critique. This work is full of ambiguity about gender and thereby it potentially destabilises phallocentrism's binary distinctions between masculine and feminine. Mendieta's *Rape Scene* (1972) provides commentary on both violence against women and the role of the gaze, and the camera in objectification when taken to its logical conclusion, renders 'woman' powerless. However, this assertion and Mendieta's later work, are open to readings of essentialism, by making overt links between biology, gender and experience, woman as oppressed, and the female form's proximity to nature, we fall back on essentialism. For example, in her *Tree of Life series* (1977) Mendieta, covered in mud, blends with the tree onto which she presses herself, thereby suggesting that 'woman' and tree are one and the same. Jane Blocker is an American feminist art historian who argues that Mendieta is obsessed with beginnings and with 'nature as the source of essentialism's power' (Blocker, 1999, p. 43). Although on one level it is a literal connection between women and their potential to give birth, the representation of the earth and woman as the "beginnings," is explored in the 1970s through the abstraction of the Goddess as a counter-site to patriarchal domination. It was felt to be extremely important for second wave feminists (ibid) to assert a mythology that countered the prevailing one at the time, and as Blocker argues, this Goddess symbolism provided a pre-patriarchal theology (ibid). In the performance and subsequent photographic documentation of Mendieta, her body is 'universal' (Blocker, 1999, p. 55) and represents the link between female and earth<sup>49</sup> as a transcendental phenomenon and a form of knowledge. The notion of the Goddess

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desire exactly? They are correct to relate the work back to power, as feminism has tended to be preoccupied with women's lack of power and these works illustrate that lack perfectly.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Mendieta's *First Silueta* (1973).

differs from the notions of woman as unformed matter that have been recurring in traditional fine art aesthetics. I will discuss this in relation to Yves Klein's work below.

"Instagram Artist" Amalia Ulman's photography (2016), as well as the contemporary photographic performance of artists such as Dawn Woods, are not a continuation of 1970s performance-to-camera. Rather, they follow artists such as Laurie Anderson<sup>50</sup> and her cyborg performances, and Catherine Opie's photography in, for example, *Jenny (Bed)* (2009). Woods and Ulman are symptomatic of a move away from representing a commonality in feminine experience, choosing instead to examine their everyday subjectivity as an isolated occurrence. Their work is also an evolution in its more explicit presentations of the photographic digital space as the performance site. Both Ulman's and Woods's work is critical of the othering nature of the Internet and the false need it creates for approval<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Laurie Anderson is one of a group of artists working in the late 1980s who created live performances that were completely integrated with new digital technology. This movement was, in part, responsible for the belief in the utopian possibilities of technology to change our culture that were embraced by theorists such as Donna Haraway. Whilst simultaneously the apparent seamless fusions between live presence and new media elicited anxiety expressed in the form of the liveness debate of the 1990s see Auslander. Anderson consciously used imagery of hybridity and cyborgs appearing as an androgynous figure in her work, building and performing with digitised instruments. Anderson works with dance, film, projections and soundscapes. In her concert *Home of the Brave* (1984), for example, she discusses binary code and the importance of moving away from duality whilst she performs as a cyborg her face concealed with her voice, at times, electronically distorted.

<sup>51</sup> Kaitlyn Maria's Instagram comment on Ulman's page, September 16<sup>th</sup> 2016, reads 'She buys expensive clothing that she can't afford for photo shoots and then returns it all. Also, it has been proven as a fact that she has created 90,000 ghost followers through some app.' Is this performative or internalisation of the gaze? There is a direct correlation between the taking of images, then the publicly posting of them as acts that seek approval in the form of 'likes'. This motivates the production of images in a narcissistic manor, however Ulman's 'ghost followers' comment on the instability and lack of authenticity of digital representation.



Fig. 2. *Slut Bucket*, Dawn Woods, (2015).

The examples I have mentioned all share the aim that the camera, the photograph, and the screen can be utilised as sites to intentionally occupy in order to take representations outside, and also beyond, a long history of phallocentrism. In *Slut Bucket* (2015) (Fig. 2), Woods performs a parody or re-appropriation of the 'Queen of Selfies' (Rogers, 2016), celebrity personality and model Kim Kardashian's poses from her book *Selfish* (2015). This is then juxtaposed with some of the trolling – Internet stalking and abuse from anonymous people that Kardashian has experienced in response to her selfies - to form Woods's work *Fat Shrek Cunt* (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). Woods (a single mother) restages Kardashian's selfies in her suburban bedroom. Woods said of the process that it was impossible to perform some of Kardashian's poses while holding her phone to photograph herself, and this prompted her to reflect that a proportion of Kardashian's selfies had been faked. Rather than being natural and spontaneous, many are highly contrived and awkward to achieve. The titles of Woods's selfies are taken from online abuse Kardashian has received as a result of posting images of herself online, in the presentation of herself as somewhat desperate to conform to this model of feminine sexuality, and in this juxtaposition of the abuse Woods presents a subject that is very far from being empowered by the camera.



Fig 3. *Fat Fucking Shrek Cunt*, Dawn Woods, (2015).

Although, as can be seen through Woods's practice, the camera and the practice of contemporary self-portraiture in the form of the selfie can be very disempowering for the subject through the negative reaction that pictures can generate as well as the inherent vanity of the act itself. The contradiction in Wood's practice is that of emerging subject-hood and the retention of emptiness created in what Sobchack has described as *epidermalisation* (2004)<sup>52</sup>, at the mercy of the media for others projections, creates tension and instability. Conversely, the camera acts as a vehicle for fantasy and escapism, particularly the ability for a subject to be simultaneously herself and not herself which, Blocker argues, is channelled by the performative part of performance-to-camera. This is clearly evident in Celeste Barber's Instagram feed, where she inserts herself virtually next to celebrities, or splices herself into their videos. This is all connected to artifice, and in this way it breaks from the 1970s' feminist work as there is nothing natural and no stability claimed in the representations. However, this should not be interpreted solely as destructive or dysfunctional, where performance converges with the camera. The enhancement through the digital enables women to exploit this fluidity and promises a new

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<sup>52</sup> The self is literally scraped out, emptied out.

subjectivity, however fleetingly. There is a different feeling to Jo Spence's work in the 1980s. Spence, in the performance-to-camera *Remodelling Photohistory (Colonization)* (1982) appears to derive agency and empowerment via the camera's frame because she specifically works with its unflinching gaze to document pain and difference, whereas Woods, Ulman and Barber encounter artifice and vulnerability in the slippery nature of their self-representations.

## **1:2 The Frame of Feminism and the Situation of Spectating**

As a feminist critique of photographic space shows, the performance directed to camera remains viable when re-appropriated by the subject. However, in the post political and re-emergent feminist period we are increasingly witnessing the expression of disempowerment afforded in the photograph. London-based contemporary artist Stehli's *Friends with Benefits* (2000), was performed to male art critics and curators. Critic Adrian Searle was invited to watch, but during the performance Stehli asked him to take ten photographs of her performance. In the following quotation, written for *The Guardian* under the title *Why Do I Feel Naked?* Searle describes the situation of spectating within Stehli's performance:

[...] In my hand is the trigger, the cable snaking away to the camera that faces me. Also facing me, and between me and the camera, is the artist. She begins to undress. I've got 10 shots. I can fire when I like. I squeeze the bulb that drives the shutter. Everything about this situation feels loaded, and I'm extremely self-conscious (Searle, 2000).

Searle defines Stehli in a gender neutral way as 'the artist', and reflects on his desire to wrest back some control through the camera's mechanisms as that of the subject desiring to control his own image. He is intent on recovering his composure by depicting Stehli's vulnerability, thus making this work a microcosm of the camera's ability to grant power. Searle, similar to Alan Duncan, the cameraman for *My Nana's Wedding (Gown)* (2010), is the man who presses the button and whose gaze controls the image in a symbolic sense, conversely, because I have framed the image and Duncan has been instructed on how to take the images and not to move the camera I retain control of the frame and the gaze. The level of instruction he has received prior to the 'shoot' means it is only a collaboration in terms of the execution of the images, because I have framed it I retain authorship. It is true however, that

there is an element of struggle over who retains control as he chooses when to press the button, my antidote to this is to work in excess – the opposite to Stehli's approach of limiting the number of images to ten. Where Stehli is overt in creating discomfort through a gaze cast directly on the cameraman, both by her and by the viewer, I leave that interpretation more open as Duncan's presence remains implicit in my performance rather than explicit. Like Stehli, I have begun to undress and I have asked Duncan to press the button when the impulse strikes him. Duncan's fast frame rate camera however, at six frames per second, means that once the button is pressed there are 5 extra pictures created each time outside of his gaze if I move very quickly that is.

Is critic Searle's use of language such as "fire" and "loaded" incidental, or does he intentionally allude to the convergence of photographic and ejaculatory metaphors? Is he aware that contemporary mainstream pornography is full of similar terminology? Mine and Stehli's performances are both critiques of spectating in a twofold sense; the sense that the spectator both retains and loses control, because the man cast in the role of the *gazer* as a social construct is exposed, thereby the work proposes an unwilling spectator in the guise of the cameraman. This begs a reconsideration of spectatorship, since it is not necessarily a desired position or even a pleasurable function for the male, or any subject. Certainly interventions such as my own and Stehli's provide commentary on the over-emphasised masculinity of the spectator. John Berger's and Laura Mulvey's accounts of the gaze, both written in the 1970s, later come under scrutiny when gender, itself, is destabilised in the 1990s. These debates have meant that within the feminist movement there has been much critique that centres on earlier assumptions of gender stability, and on over-reliance on the categories of 'male' and 'female.' Suffice to say, these have yet to find a resolution. Critiques of Kristeva and Irigaray as 'essentialist' and over-determining the category 'woman' (Judith Butler, 1990), have been countered by theorisation of the significance of an embodied female position, such as those by Mira Schor (1997) and Rosi Braidotti (1994). This over-determination between the concept of the gaze and camera, and 'gazer' as male and 'gazed-at' as female, prompted feminist thinker Elin Diamond to coin the term, 'looking-at-being-looked-at-ness' (Diamond, 1988, p. 129). Diamond's contention is that the 'problem of the

gaze' has been attended to far more than 'interventions that dismantle that gaze' (ibid). She argues that what is needed is 'a female body in representation that resists fetishization [and presents] a viable position for the female spectator' (Diamond, 1988, p. 83). In direct response to this, Stehli's work can certainly be considered to be contributing to a wider feminist critique, as she makes a puppet of the spectator, and it is this inversion of the binary process of looking that renders male subjectivity both vulnerable and uncomfortable.

In Stehli's performance *Friends with Benefits*, also known as *The Strip Series* (1999-2000), the self-awareness and exposure experienced by the viewer becomes the focus of the drama; the performance documents that remain render the viewer the subject. When in turn we spectate, the process of looking becomes reflexive, and in this way, Stehli is able to apprehend the gaze, and invert its mechanics. In an interview for *Musée Magazine* by Cory Rice, Stehli is dismissive of the idea that there is any meaning to be gained from discussing this work in relation to the gaze, stating that this is an overly familiar and dated way to describe things of which she is tired (Stehli, 2015). However, in the same interview Stehli describes how powerful and full of desire and pleasure looking is as an act (ibid), and she also describes how the performance did not work when she performed it with another woman.

To both gender the look and also render it heterosexual, while ascribing pleasure and desire to the terms of observing/consuming appears to contradict her dismissiveness towards the gaze. She sees this as an outmoded theorisation of her photography and her performance methodology, which arguably, utterly embodies the male gaze. This is a continuation of what Karen Horney, a feminist psychoanalyst who was critical of Freud's theory of penis envy, described in 1932 as "the dread of woman" (Horney quoted in Benjamin, 1995, p. 81), which, in short, is that man's desire for woman is coupled with dread (ibid). Horney quotes from Friedrich Schiller's *The Diver* (1797), in which the young man survives diving in the ocean only to drown when he throws himself back into the sea again to prove himself worthy of a woman. Benjamin argues that this longing for woman, and the fear it creates is concealed by either adoration or contempt. Irigaray, working from the same analogy of the sea as allegorical of the dread of femininity, this so-called sea

that overwhelms man argues that because of feeling overwhelmed he must dissect femininity in order to control it this happens through the gaze (Irigaray, 1985).

The trick in Stehli's work is that it appears to disclose the 'subject who looks', only for the realisation to dawn as we look that it is not showing us ourselves, because we are really the looking subject. The one captured viewing is now the subject, whereas we, the viewers, remain hidden. If we position Stehli's work as feminist critique, then it is certainly a mimesis of the process in Western art history which renders the singular perception as central and the viewpoint that is shored up 'through the experience of its loss [...] the looking eye sees itself as a vanishing emptiness, as a blank' (Phelan, 1993, p. 25). In other words, the man/the camera operator in Stehli's performance, performs for us, the viewer, that which we are experiencing. Our look is upon that which we can never possess (the other) even when stripped, remains a mystery and a threat, where the act of looking is alienating.

That part of feminism's goals that reside in the alteration of the field of representation has been discussed since the early 1970s, and women making art imply political undertones because of the historic difficulties women have encountered with breaking into the academy. Griselda Pollock argues that hostility towards the feminine, feminists, and feminism is due to the fact that feminist art production is not simply another addition to a post-modern plurality (Pollock, 1988), but that it is a revolutionary force for radical social change (ibid). As such, feminism meets not simply polite disdain (although there is plenty of that), it meets resistance, hostility, repression, censorship and ridicule (ibid). This atmosphere, for a woman making art, epitomises the continuation of a phallogentric logic that encompasses binary thought as well as processes of othering and representation. Natalie Loveless, in a book review for *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art* (2011) on binary distinctions, states that 'as is well known, feminist theory has, since its beginnings, worked to problematise binary distinctions and the seemingly fixed 'nature' of identity categories' (Loveless, 2013, p. 4).



### 1:3 My Studio Performances with Matilda (2011-2012)

The practice I am submitting with this thesis has been consciously, and purposely, directed to camera rather than to a live audience, and this methodology is subsequently described as 'performance-to-camera' which distinguishes it from documentation of performance. This photographic performance space is part of an ongoing critique about the terms of women's visibility and its continuing paradoxical nature as outlined previously<sup>53</sup>.

Irigaray's term *phallocentrism* is of utmost importance to this analysis because, in the words of Grosz, when Irigaray uses this term she not only refers to 'the continuing submersion of women's autonomy in the norms, ideals and models devised by men' (Grosz, 1990, p. 174), she also refers to the treatment of the sexes as if they were just variations of the same sex (ibid). A challenge to this system can be relatively subtle, Irigaray is interested in women's mimicry and hysteria as methodologies that are subversive to more regimented versions of gender. Grosz points out that 'the hysteric mimes' and is therefore able to replace the real with simulacrum, where 'the hysteric mimes and thus exceeds, patriarchal requirements of femininity' (ibid). Is the potential agency in a photographic image limited, or at least conflicted, by its mechanical aspects and their impact on the visual and perceptual fields? I argue that intentionality, which can take the form of performance-to-camera, can be used by women as a means by which to attempt to reclaim the representational field and counteract the camera's reclamation of 'reality.' If performance is also tasked with collapsing the binaries that the camera helps police, I assert performance-to-camera can destabilise its mechanical detachment. In my performance, *My Nana's Wedding Gown* (2010) (Fig. 4), I attempt this by staging one representation of a claim to a universal aspect of femininity, namely the hysteric<sup>54</sup>. If to mimic lacks agency when it

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<sup>53</sup> I have chosen to merge this paradox with maternal aesthetics in Chapter Two to overcome the inertia and desperation created by the othering potential of digital interaction; see Wood's practice at the beginning of this chapter. I hope to promote agency through the continued insistence on embodiment and a form of presence in the subject and the inter-subjective nature of the play between myself and my daughter Matilda.

<sup>54</sup> This relates to feminist psychoanalytical theories of woman as a mask or masquerade as theorised by feminist thinkers such as Irigaray in the 1970s. Hilary Robinson defines the tension described by Irigaray in the performance of the mimetic act as, the pressure to masquerade as a woman, that is, within the bounds of pre-formed notions of femininity at odds with the transgressive potential of mimicry. Robinson argues that 'if woman's adaption of 'femininity' is a mimetic process' (Robinson, 2006, p. 36) then apart from the pressing problem of its restrictive nature there is also the possibility

is enforced, in this context by Irigaray's notion of phallocentrism, then to become the hysteric is to regain autonomy in the act, in this instance the act of being photographed. I argue that this work is a departure from the ironic Instagram projects I have discussed previously, because the maternal and matrilineal methodologies give the work a depth of meaning that is informed by Irigaray's project to access hidden feminine subjectivity, and because Elizabeth Grosz contends that this subjectivity will invariably exceed or overflow' (Grosz, 1990, p. 176) oppositional or binary structures, which addresses the research question: how can maternal aesthetics re-invigorate women's performance-to-camera in the light of the failure of historical feminist interventions to successfully oppose the maintenance of gender binaries? I liken Woods's performance-to-camera to this analysis of the function of mimicry in destabilising patriarchal mythology around what constitutes an acceptable (that is, non-threatening to masculinity) form of femininity, where Woods manages to mimic, and simultaneously become hysterical, through her acts of mimicry, for example, her mimicry of Kim Kardashian.

The excessive nature of the maternal, which encompasses visceral abjection through to narcissistic identification, is therefore, in the context of hysteria that I am siting this practice, potent. Irigaray argues that in a phallocentric system, the dominant mode of being will always win out, where 'whatever has been defined as "more" (true, right, clear, reasonable, intelligible, paternal, masculine...) [wins out] over its "other," its "different" [...] its negative, its "less" (fantastic, harmful, obscure, "mad," sensible, maternal, feminine...)' (Irigaray, 1985, p. 275). Irigaray employs a counter-strategy against 'women's containment within an image and a logic that renders them mute and hysterical' (Grosz, 1990, p. 174). She seeks to do this by the turning phallocentrism inside-out, 'holding the mirror up to itself' (ibid), and for Irigaray, this creates an 'enigmatic feminine figure' (Grosz, 1990, pp. 174-175). I develop notions of jouissance and hysteria within my performance-to-camera which is in part a continuation or visualisation of these inversion techniques. The coupling

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for subversion and an over-mimicry, therefore Robinson argues, that Irigaray defines hysteria as 'a calculated continuum of the masquerade 'femininity' (ibid). This results in two things happening one is that, in psychoanalytical terms, women will be frequently pushed over the edge into hysterical acts because it is a logical conclusion of the processes of mime and masquerade acting as a straightjacket and suppressing them through the lack of originary voices; and two, that there is conversely, within the hysterical act, space to reclaim subjectivity and agency.

of a maternal aesthetic with a woman's sexual desires is challenging, as is the hysteric's capacity to destabilise phallocentric realities.

Thus far, I have been discussing performance-to-camera as a series of experiments to disrupt phallocentrism, such as when the processes of representation and objectification are deployed by women artists in a self-reflexive or mimetic manner they are rendered hysterical acts in the way Irigaray proposes. By placing the performance so consciously inside what, on the surface is a distinct frame, I critically comment on Western aesthetics historic handling of "woman" as mute material or matter. I argue that the exposure of the opposition of matter and form in feminist art-making is purposeful rather than coincidental, as is the clash of the particular experience with the symbolic. An ironic deployment of universal or more generalised stereotypes are used in my practice to undermine the implicit aesthetic function that the frame defines as matter and keeps that which is unformed, or un-aestheticised, or chaotic, on the outside. It has become commonplace in feminist theory to comment on how this aesthetic process has particularly excluded women (e.g., Pollock (1988), Jones (2006), Schor (1997), in short, because women have been confined as matter they have been denied agency<sup>55</sup>.

As my practice submission for this thesis developed the maternal, its relationship to the feminine has become the rupture in the frame, a disruption that is necessary to bring that which has been excluded into aesthetic focus. The maternal aesthetic that I developed was in response to the desire, outlined above, to disrupt the mechanism of the frame and the construction of binary phallocentric thinking and logic in direct response to my experience as a mother-artist. The maternal aesthetic is therefore based in the enactment of care and the pragmatism this elicits, and is heavily reliant on chance and process, also called 'givens,' play, and transformation<sup>56</sup>. The

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<sup>55</sup> In Chapter Two I will evidence this assertion by discussing Evelyn Silver and Shirley Cameron's *The Swinging Sixties: We Were There!* Yves Klein's *Anthropométrie de la Période Bleue* (1960) inspired performance in the early 1990s.

<sup>56</sup> Lena Šimić has encouraged me to think of the situation of child-rearing and art-making as not mutually exclusive, by introducing the notion of 'givens,' as part of a maternal methodology. 'Givens' is a way to work with what you have and explore the creative potential of your specific circumstance and even find use or purpose within the performance. Šimić's example is putting her baby to bed, which was part of the work yet also useful as her baby was asleep by the end of it Šimić, performed in

maternal aesthetic exists within a wider feminist framework whose aims are not only empowerment and agency but also the opening up of representational discourse to include the maternal experience. The maternal aesthetic is able to push further the critique of photography and representation, which began with women's self-reflexive performance-to-camera, and this is possible because the maternal elicits more profound or complex destabilisations of the frame. Western art has conventionally used aesthetics to provide distance between the artwork and the audience and thereby uphold the aura of an artwork<sup>57</sup>, this form of aesthetic art production relies on binaries (Derrida, 1987a) and collapses when there is no demarcation between inside and outside. My practice, for example when working with 'givens' or put more literally 'what you are given' is an immersive style of aesthetic production that abandons the aforementioned conventions and collapses binary structures.

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*Sid Jonah Anderson* (2008). Similarly Cameron's washing of her twins can be viewed as a 'given' and also useful (Cameron with twins and Angela Carter, *Washing the Twins*, 1977). In a similar vein, my playing with Matilda *MSP with Matilda* (2011) can be viewed as a 'given' as I keep the baby entertained and engaged whilst creating my work.

<sup>57</sup> Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1999), argues that mass re-production of the art image has reduced the distance between the audience and the artwork and thereby dissipated its aura (effect).

## 1:4 Photography and 'Reality' in Performance



Fig. 4. *My Nana's Wedding (Gown)*, Myfanwyn Ryan, (2010).

Flusser claims that reality, defined here as 'corporeal presence', is destabilised by the photographic universe (Flusser, 2000, p. 65) that we all inhabit. However, this is not so for feminist interventions in performance and photography, as they often aim to establish new or fresh views of the world through discovering hidden truths, and in this way, my performance-to-camera strives to embody the image. Flusser perceives the destabilising effect of photography as rendering the photograph and the act of photography commonplace and naturalised, or even un-aesthetic. The notion that the photograph is an everyday but extra-ordinary object is useful to feminist critique, because such critique seeks instability in 'reality' as a means with which to exploit

and expose hidden structures that suppress the subject. That which is concealed can then be revealed as a form of empowerment, in this case specifically the intimacy between mothers and daughters. If the authority of the photograph is destabilised, it can be exploited and its ability to present a totality, mimicked. This can be so because, as Heidegger asserts (1971), new worlds are opened by the artwork, which can be read as a collapse of aesthetic distance (Susan Broadhurst, 1999, p. 36) and, arguably, this also includes photography. In short, there is no reality from which the photograph can extract data any longer, as the photograph is the 'world'. Where Flusser works hard to maintain the oppositions constructed by the camera, the binaries of inside and outside the frame, the 'world' and then what the camera extracts from the world as material in the interplay between matter and its framing as 'formed' for a new world. My approach to photography and the camera follows, instead, Irigaray in that performance's excess coupled with the excess of the maternal is able to exceed the image. This idea of excess is key in order to not enable the normative aspects of the camera to take hold, therefore the coupling of photography and performance within a feminist maternal aesthetic creates the radical difference. In this overflow that permeates binaries we can overcome repressive phallogocentric structures, it is advantageous for feminists to claim the un-aesthetic everyday marginalised space and politicise and aestheticise it because it has been neglected and because it challenges our social norms about value and importance.

I see my initial performance-to-camera, *MNWG* (2010), as a treatment of the camera as possessing the potential to expose, reveal and break down distinctions between past and present, interior and exterior, front and reverse, as well as here and there. In this instance, the performance does not concur with Flusser's constructed universe, nor Metz's notion of the cut (Squiers, 1990) where something has been severed from reality, as I am not presenting a slice of reality or a 'new' world that has been clinically removed or parted from the everyday, but rather that which has been obscured, ignored, concealed or overlooked is presented as 'part of the world.' A revealing of the obscured rather than a removal of the everyday to a place where it can be aestheticised in a distant unemotional manner. My attitude to the camera and photography also differs to that of Weber's, who argues that for Walter Benjamin, the

camera 'penetrates deep into the fabric of the given' (Weber, 1996, p. 91), and that the camera violates the body's integrity (ibid). I do not agree that the camera only produces images that are 'torn apart' and that both disperse and fragment being (Weber, 1996, p. 92). Rather, like many contemporary subjects, I use the photographic space to 'become real' or rather 'realer' and create relations and links between myself and others, in this instance, my deceased grandmother and my oldest daughter and our negotiation of separation<sup>58</sup>. I open up the photographic space and our notions of absence and presence and the past to the possibility of yielding something more than absence or regret, lack or excess. Jane Gallop (2011) argues that Roland Barthes' work in *Camera Lucida* (1980), opens up such a path 'for those of us who, like Barthes, would presume that our subjective experience – particularly our subjective experience of photography – might also count as knowledge' (Gallop, 2011, p. 236).

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<sup>58</sup> Here I am referring to *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012), which I will discuss in Chapter Two.

### 1:5 My Nana's Wedding (Gown), (2010)

This performance-to-camera, featuring my Nana's wedding dress, is my attempt to explore the potential in the camera to realise and sustain, not simply a visualisation of my grandmother as she prepared for her wedding in the 1940s, but a physical manifestation or act of embodiment. Both myself and her dress are 'real entities' (Fig. 5. below) and we can see the effect of this on my body. However, it is not simply the fact of the dress or the scenario where I try to wear it (it is too small for me), it is the experience of being photographed while partly undressed, coupled with the vulnerability this exposure creates. The camera symbolises the potential for phallic repression and dominance, and mirrors the wedding dress's symbolism of similar processes. However, this is not the whole picture, because we also see the potential for play within both performance and the space opened up by the camera, and this contradicts any sensation of repression or confinement.



Fig. 5. *My Nana's Wedding (Gown)*, Myfanwyn Ryan, (2010).



The camera in this context has a very specific and practical purpose within my performance as a creative tool that can create a bridge or point of access between me and my grandmother. For Heidegger, tools are central to a conception of being, a conception not based in a transcendent model but rather in a being-in-the-world model (Heidegger, 1973), or in other words, the everydayness of being. Heidegger uses the hammer as an example, but I shall replace it with the 'camera' to state that 'the less we just stare at the [camera]-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become' (Heidegger, 1973, p. 98). This form of knowledge can only be gained through use; theorising alone will not grant us this level of understanding of the camera, nor of its function in the representation of women or the possibilities it provides, because the tool is manipulable.

The only image of my grandmother that remains is the formal one for which she posed with my grandfather, who is in uniform, on the steps of the Register Office. My grandmother clings to my grandfather's arm and smiles into the camera. I am aware that many women lived independently during the war years. I doubt my grandmother married as a virgin. She had lived and worked alone, smoked cigarettes, rode a bicycle around London, delivered babies in the blitz, and married a black man in her late twenties.

During the making of the work a locked studio was used where the performance was only ever encountered as 'live' by the cameraman who photographed me. This masculine eye was problematic at the time, and remains so because, as we know from Irigaray's writing on the topic, 'the ludic mimicry, the fiction, the "make believe," the "let's pretend" [...] are stopped short, impeded, *controlled by a master-signifier*, the phallus, and by its representative(s)' (Irigaray, 1985, p. 60). The hysteria performed in *MNWG* (2010) is aligned with Irigaray's contention that 'hysteria is stigmatised as a place where fantasies, ghosts, and shadows fester and must be unmasked, interpreted, brought back to the reality of a repetition, a reproduction, a representation' (ibid) that fits with the original memory. This representation of the hysterical bride in my performance, exceeds phallogentrism in its displacement of the

'real' wedding and the mimicry of hysteria, and in its insistence on matrilineal connections.

Within a feminist reading, it is the frame that is symbolic of a binary aesthetic, and specifically its function in maintaining an insistence on interiority and exteriority within an artwork that is subjected to change. There are a number of reasons for destabilising aesthetic distance, which has historically presented obstacles for women wanting to create art. I would argue that there is inherently something impossible in a divorce from the self, from a separation from the self in the artwork. In other words, there is an inherent problematic in any attempt to delineate a purely aesthetic space. I have found that maternal aesthetics provides a set of principles that inherently challenge binary thinking, and this, I assert is apparent in *MSP with Matilda* (2011-12) where the frame facilitates our interaction as mother and daughter.

### **1:6 Performing the Photograph: a Feminist Intervention**

The notion of agency being enabled through the camera is contradictory, because the insistence on participating in representation and, in this instance, particularly the power to visualise and present the self to ourselves and to 'others' in Western culture, coincides with the redundancy of these gestures. The category of 'woman' becomes redundant, or more precisely, incorrect, just at that moment when women are better placed in the West to photograph and explore their subjectivity in readily transferable and self-publishable forms. This is amplified by the redundancy of the act of photographing yourself as being empowering. The feminist goal of embodying the photographic space to reverse the process of being hollowed-out (Sobchack, 2004) is further problematized as we have moved into digital processes. Images have proliferated, and the speed of image transfer has become instantaneous. If we are not careful, we will return to a form of visual primacy that, when laid out in a patriarchal context (Hilary Robinson, 2006) results in the continued move away from, and exaggeration between, the difference of touch and form 'which is what the phallic economy requires of sight' (Robinson, 2006, p. 130), and is part of the maternal aesthetics potency that it is able to shift the emphasis between these modes of experience.



Fig. 6. *My Nana's Wedding (Gown)*, Myfanwyn Ryan. (2010).

Women can easily fall foul of phallic domination, in their rendering as hysteric (Fig.5, Fig. 6.), or irrational and incoherent, or unformed like matter. It is for these reasons that Robinson describes women's interventions in the visual and their attempts to visualise themselves as 'poignant and [...] heroic [and] with deeply political potential' (ibid, p. 64). In this vein, Irigaray has argued that 'representation can dispense with and supplant the role' (Irigaray, 1985, p. 116) that woman has been assigned as a flat mirror. The metaphor of the flat mirror (ibid, pp. 167-168), in Irigaray's *Speculum*, could easily be replaced with the metaphor of the photographic image as a reflective device within Western culture, used to shore up masculinity.

On several occasions, I have worked with the motif of going behind the screen, and in this thesis the works I made with Matilda often involve inverting the image or revealing its underside. This inversion is achieved by collapsing screens or crawling behind them. In one sequence, I roll myself up in part of the backdrop as we play hide-and-seek together. In this way the performance aspect in the term *performance-to-camera* enables us to traverse what Irigaray describes as 'the reverse of the mirror' (Robinson, 2006, p. 67), the back of something that is concealed from the 'phallogentric gaze' (ibid). The ability of performance to traverse this space is reliant

on the disruption of the two-dimensional aspects of the flat image, since the viewer must be taken into the structure of the photographic image. This invitation to view the reverse results in the practice I have submitted here that is best conceived of as a consideration of the frame, both symbolically and conceptually, within the performance-to-camera submitted with this thesis.

This break with two-dimensionality involves the presentation of a concave mirror and the cavity it also elicits. This is of interest here, because it directly correlates with the imagery Irigaray plays with to evoke a difference to masculine visual norms in our culture. Irigaray's belief that there is something on the back, that not everything is visible, is precisely what led this thesis from matrilineal performance-to-camera, to mother-daughter performance at first in front of the camera, and then finally to the liminal site, as well as performance with my mother (this later work is not included here) who in a circular way becomes the grandmother. The inter-changeability of roles is typical of the maternal aesthetic when it centres on the matrilineal; I am daughter, mother, granddaughter; my mother, grandmother, and so on.

I argue that performance as praxis exceeds rational thought or objective perception, and operates instead in sensation and instinct. This is illustrated in the first piece of work submitted with this thesis, *MNWG* (2010). Although performed to camera, my journal entry on the day of performing this piece is full of physical and sensory description obtained from my physical body. This body is important to emphasise; it is the locus and originary place where the work resides, the camera grants the performance the possibility of continuing on after the present moment enabling greater visibility for the performance but the camera is purely instrumental in a process that is embodied.

Because women cannot separate themselves from the image, and struggle to ascend the matter form binary, they remain part of what Lacan has described as an 'imaginary realm.' The effect of this is an inability to pass through Lacan's mirror phase, the process whereby an infant self-identifies, that according to his theory is necessary for the perception of the self as a singular subject and the formation of the super ego or the 'idealised self' (Dolan, 1993, p. 125). In short, women are held by the frame. However, it is important to note that Lacan's theory of the mirror phase

includes the idea of a misidentification with one's image brought on by the big Other's insistence on who the child is or represents, and in this context the question of whether the mother acts as a big Other or authoritarian figure over the child's subjectivity is a pertinent one. This is exactly what I seek to examine, I the mother: all powerful or powerless, existing in the space where woman is rendered 'completely marginal to the signifying process' (ibid, p. 125). Rather than arguing for women's continued subjective lack, I argue that this inability to pass through the mirror phase places women in a perpetual transformation that the frame might seek to halt, or actually facilitate, as will become clear as this thesis progresses. The perpetual mirror phase is arguably manifested in performance-to-camera processes and methodology.

My argument is thus, that the aforementioned perpetual nature of women's relationship with the camera, which struggles to transcend the difficulties of the gaze, objectification, othering, and enforcement of normative behaviour, presents a troubled context for those of us choosing to work in this medium. The camera retains an internal ideology that facilitates accepted narratives of the feminine and the masculine and this is one of its frames. It holds an inherent ability to re-territorialise transgression through capture. Such things, its habit of mummifying the living and capturing and nullifying, make working with the camera conceptually problematic. Susan Sontag<sup>59</sup> wrote that the language of photography, the terminology of 'shooting' and 'capturing' and the general air of penetration exposes the patriarchal subtext embodied by the camera (Sontag. 1977: pp. 13-15). In the case of Jane Gallop and her son Max, who are photographed by father and husband Dick Blau, this idea of apprehension is pertinent, Gallop writes 'the idea of a wolf family suggests that here is a family [...] captured by the photographic gaze' (Chernick, 2011, p. 244). She refers to a photograph taken by Blau in 1990 (Chernick, 2011, p. 243), where her son, who is in the bath and Gallop, who is standing beside the bath, both eye the camera with hostile expressions. Gallop describes these expressions as resentful but suggesting empowerment through their display of hostility and return of the gaze. Gallop recalls the circumstances around the image being taken and

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<sup>59</sup> Susan Sontag was an American journalist, novelist, women's rights and anti-war activist who was very active in the 1960s-2000s. Her seminal work is *On Photography* (1977) which asks ethical and philosophical questions of the photographic medium.

suggests the hostility in their gaze is inauthentic (ibid, p. 245), although it is still striking that they are living with a photographer who sells and exhibits their images. He had entered the bathroom unannounced with a camera to 'capture' them, and in that sense, both Gallop and her son are certainly 'wild' to Blau (ibid, p. 245).

The indeterminacy of authenticity in the images captured through the lens is not a new sensation; it is a major theme that runs through all of the works I have outlined which are concerned with performance-to-camera. Am I caring or appearing to? Irigaray's utilisation of the speculum as symbolism in her book, *Speculum of the other Woman* (1974), also comments on the power created by wielding a device to enhance vision. Irigaray argues that there is a need for devices as an aid with which to arouse oneself, and in this context the camera, as incarnate in the digital device, would represent this 'arousal,' as it provokes experimentation and literally invents new acts of seduction and sex. Conversely, these self-same devices of heightened awareness also function as devices for conformity, or what Irigaray would term 'unity'. Irigaray talks of a long search for 'the instrument, the lever, and, in more cases than one, the term of his pleasure' (Irigaray, 1985, p. 232). In this instance 'woman' becomes interchangeable with the 'machine' or the mechanics of arousal.

## 1:7 Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed some of the many theorisations of the camera, and feminist analysis of the camera and the visual, more generally, as an important factor in the critique of phallogentrism through performance-to-camera. The initial ideas I explored were in relation to the merging of photography and performance and to the historic feminist interventions I have described, such as Ana Mendieta's *Rape Series* (1972), as well as contemporary practice, such as Stehli's *Friends With Benefits* (Stehli, 1999-2000) and Woods's *Fat Fucking Shrek Cunt series* (Woods, 2015). Although the camera, in its capacity to create frames and frame experience, signifies a certain way of aesthetic thinking which involves a removal or distancing from the everyday I think that conversely, the frame created by the camera, permits acts of mimicry following Irigaray (1974) and Robinson (2006). In this light performance-to-camera I argue is an important feminist counter-strategy, as explored in my practice *MNWG* (2010). After developing and exhausting the camera's subversive potential, women artists have, through the maternal, discovered that the camera can serve as a means with which to facilitate the development of subjectivity and inter-subjective interactions<sup>60</sup>. I argue that women perform-to-camera without the pre-supposition of a stable subject, and in that way have less to lose than a fixed masculine position. Because of this women are more readily able to use performance-to-camera to make radical gestures and stake a claim to autonomous subjectivity<sup>61</sup>. The tactic of performance-to-camera is able to apprehend the subject's placement within subjective lack and a world of perpetual surfaces and depthless presences, because, and not in spite of, the inherent contradictions it embodies as a methodology. That is, the contradiction of asserting agency and embodiment through the very thing (the camera) charged with framing the male gaze and control through the specular.

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<sup>60</sup> Admittedly, this therapeutic potential, when photography is merged with performance, was crystallised in Jo Spence's phototherapy in the 1980s and 1990s, which proposed the opposite notion to the one where technological performance symbolises a decentred subjectivity.

<sup>61</sup> Similarly this willingness to experiment with subjectivity in the photographic space can be observed in the LGBTQIA and BAME communities, those with disabilities or on the neuro-diverse spectrum or with mental health issues, as well as, amongst children and teenagers. And, as above, Jo Spence opens that photographic space up to those who have terminal illness also. In other words, the potential for mimicry enabled through the camera is both a form of repression and a form of freedom.

The anxiety of there being nothing there, which Irigaray argues is staved off by the reflection of masculinity back onto itself (1985), and that Cavarero argues women inherently represent for men (2006), is examined within the practice made for this thesis, for example, by performing against the blank screen/studio backdrop. This approach, where the blank photography studio was the setting, was reminiscent of techniques used to shoot objects, or catalogue style fashion shoots, with clinical, stark lighting that creates strong shadows; a white, sterile space with myself and later my daughter Matilda, cast as moving specimens. The neutrality exacerbates the hysteria and the irony because I am not offering myself up as raw material; rather I am presenting my subjective experiences.

The camera inspects, records and restricts how, when, and what is seen. The camera is also a completely unique apprehension of the world, and within this context, it is useful to performance. However, the camera had too much control over these performances, and I struggled to transcend an object position because, at best, I oscillated between object-hood and subject-hood, similar to the way the mother does in culture and society. In Blau's practice, the father photographs the family, and in an essay on the documentation of her pregnancy and family life, Gallop reflects on the object-hood of pregnancy, namely her pride in her swollen belly - 'her prize watermelon' - followed by the 'shame in displaying [her belly...] that is soft and flaccid' in a later picture of herself naked with her son, taken by Blau in 1991. Thus, Gallop reflects on the 'phallic dimensions of her pride and shame' (Chernick, 2011, pp. 237-252).

One function of the image of difference, rather than images of repetition, is that it may be possible to create a viewer who is primed for recognising the mechanisms at work in phallocentric images. This in turn lends, whether intentionally or not, a heavy irony to mainstream media or traditional representations where there is a reliance on the visual device of woman as a blank canvas or screen onto which to project. This uncertainty is embraced in a feminist methodology because of its resistant and political possibilities. Although the radical purpose that exists in women's staged photography is not new, and now also extends to how different so-called 'minority' or



fringe groups have used the camera, it is clear that there is a consistent and prolonged critique in this vein.

This irony is not lost here. Both my performance *MNWG* (2010), and the later *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012), share, in their commitment to assert a subjectivity as a woman, whilst experiencing the failure of still operating in the framework of a binary system. I have been examining considerations of the camera as a function or by-product of an 'instrumental vision,' coupled with the notion that a reassertion to phallic domination is the inevitable by-product of any exploration of women's subjectivity. In short, discourse and dialogue are restricted within pre-existing patriarchal structures that seek to delimit experience for what it deems to be others. To present oneself as an 'other' to seek a subjective identity is only equally patriarchal if the new position also seeks to absorb all other positions. In my work, submitted with this thesis, the camera symbolises the paradox that precedes any feminist engagement with the digital camera and representation. That is precisely because the camera is, arguably, a pre-existing structure that embodies a visual language reliant on an instrumental vision that would, according to Sobchack, 'make us view our bodies as images or objects' (Meskimmon, 2003, p. 144) that it can be exploded by that which it may seek to obscure or repress. The photograph marks that moment of being neither subject nor object (Barthes, 2000, p. 14; Gallop, 2011, pp. 234-235). It is where the moment of becoming an object is felt as a doubling of subject and object (Chernick, 2011, p. 238), and where this ambiguity in the photograph and its boundaries.

The subject who has put herself in the photograph intentionally, and is in control of her pose, context, costume, action and so forth, can further destabilise the mythology that exists in the realm of photography and representation. In a literal sense, there is an act of offering oneself up for reproduction and dissemination, coupled with a becoming, and an element of mediatization, involved in the act of performance-to-camera that is inherently a symbolic relinquishing of control to the spectator. In Gallop's essay (2011), it is striking how she is able to move between subject and spectator positions as she reflects on the work by her husband, and her

role as a mother in such work. These type of reflections led to a deeper exploration of the dynamic between myself and the subject in relation to the camera and photographer and to aesthetics.

In conclusion, the link between the frame, and its inherent failure, as Derrida successfully argues (1987a), to accomplish the impossible task of maintaining a clear inside and outside, is exemplified in the insertion of women's bodies that invoke unclear boundaries and confuse normative ideas and clear distinctions between the body and the mind and interior and exterior spaces. In the next chapter I will demonstrate that Derrida's parergon is a useful methodology with which to create a feminist performance-to-camera practice as it actively seeks to undo distinctions between form and matter, and other binaries such as pre-aesthetic and aesthetic, inner and outer, and so forth. Further to this, I will argue that the maternal aesthetic compliments and makes execution of Derrida's theoretical position possible. This is because the parergon, that Derrida describes as an intermediate zone, is there to be exploited, it is a space that holds the potential for play and subversion, its non-entity status chimes with the many of us who feel disembodied, disempowered or in other ways invisible or overlooked. However, I have been discussing the contradictory nature of the camera and the process of mimicry and hysteria, as well as, the notion of an image that is not flat, all of which are prevalent themes in performance-to-camera. In this chapter I have put forth the argument that the feminist critique of the male gaze, through the camera lens and the photographic space, in the form of performance-to-camera, has the tendency to be deactivated and fail in its critique and be re-subsumed into a fine art canon that easily renders the gesture innocuous. In short these tactics have been attempted countless times and the male gaze still reigns supreme.

## Chapter 2: Performing Maternal Aesthetics and Framing Mother-Daughter Relationships

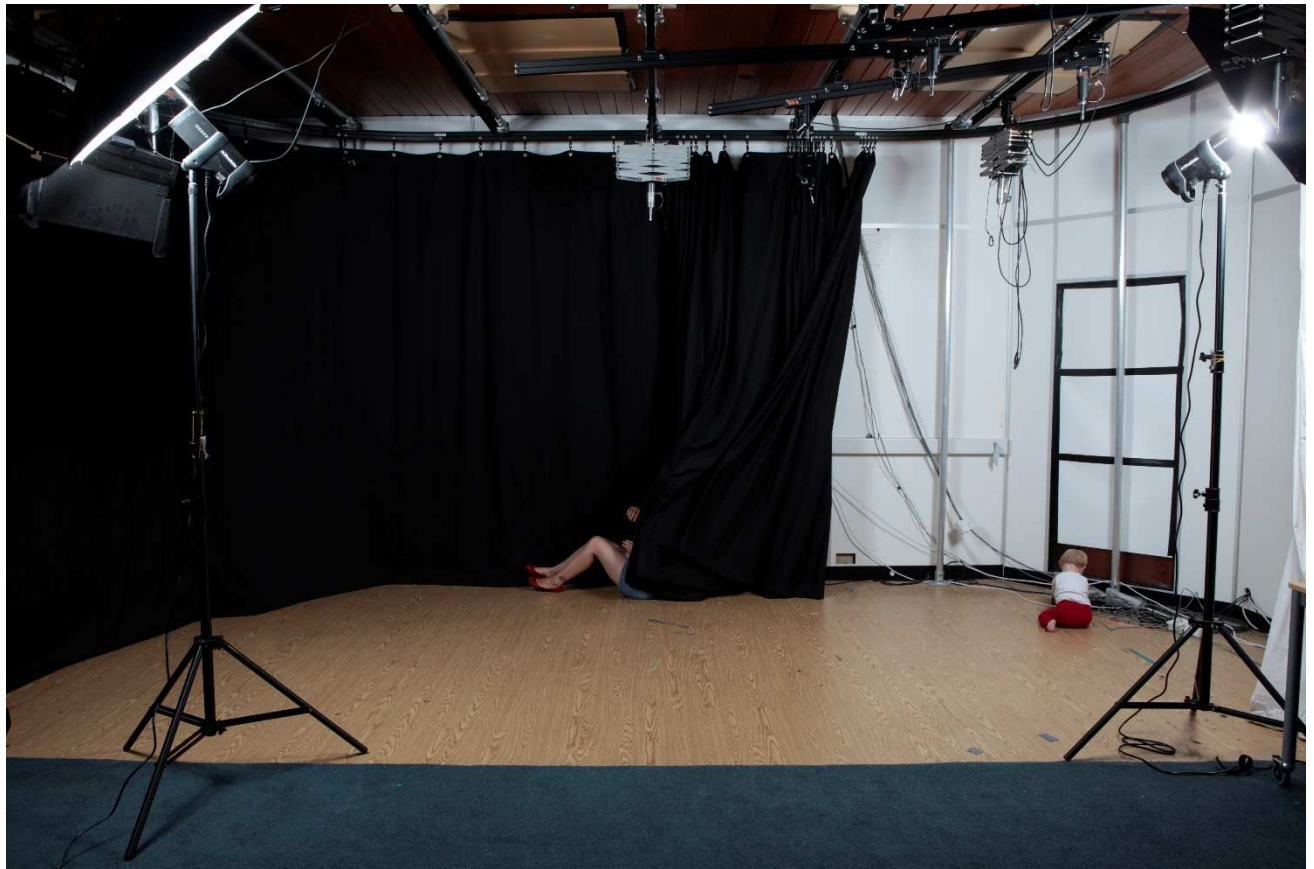


Fig. 7. *MSP with Matilda*, Myfanwyn Ryan, (2011-2012).

### 2:1 Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that women's performance-to-camera when viewed as a critique of aspects of phallocentrism, as discussed in Chapter One, is re-ignited when mother-daughter relationships are explored in and through the frame. I will be addressing the research question: How can representing mother-daughter relationships re-invigorate women's performance-to-camera in the light of the failure of historical feminist interventions to successfully oppose the maintenance of dualistic thought? In Chapter One I introduced work that was performed-to-camera and was concerned with feminine subjectivity I will now theorise performance-to-camera through Derrida's parergon, a deconstruction exercise on dualistic thought and traditional Western aesthetics, to demonstrate one motivation for staging live art within the photographic space, as well as to demonstrate how much is at stake conceptually, theoretically and politically in this gesture. I will deploy Irigaray and

Alison Stone<sup>62</sup> and will analyse Lena Šimić<sup>63</sup> and Shirley Cameron's performance practices with their children. I will combine this with recent writing on the maternal aesthetic from Andrea Liss<sup>64</sup>, from Šimić, and my own thoughts, to show how this maternal aesthetic breaks the frame by, not only surpassing the image, but also by exceeding those established boundaries<sup>65</sup> that supposedly define the subject. As my practice has developed, I have been able to make connections with other artists who work with maternal symbolisms, and my work is now contextualised within this framework of what I shall call maternal aesthetics. An aesthetic which seeks to challenge phallocentrism through the insistence on a feminine maternal subjectivity. Artists Lindsay Page, Jennifer Verson, Grace Surman and Bernadette Laimbauer, who are my contemporaries and who all perform with their daughters, as well as, Shirley Cameron's historic mother-daughter performances, in addition to Šimić's work in the field of maternal aesthetics, all inform and contextualise my own practice. The maternal aesthetic is derived from experience, the everyday, the body, the breaking of boundaries, taboos and dualisms, the referent of maternalism and the mother.

In the previous chapter, I focused on, the constraining principles of the photograph and the difficulties we face when attempting to disrupt this. Now I will focus more closely on some of the causes of phallocentric anxiety, namely the relationship between mothers and daughters and how this is representationally radical and can subvert the frame, and by association create aesthetic notions radically different to those which are more conventional. In the words of Stone, the feminist endeavour to explore 'the possibility of female subjectivity' (Stone, 2012, p. 4) has arisen out of Irigaray's work to 'rescue women from object status' (ibid). I have been discussing this process via performance-to-camera, however, it is problematic to rely solely on

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<sup>62</sup> Alison Stone writes on European feminist philosophy and is based at Lancaster University. She has focused on the maternal and feminine subjectivity.

<sup>63</sup> Lena Šimić is a mother to four boys. She is co-founder (with Gary Anderson) of *the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home*, and she has compiled a collection of maternal live art for LADA, and also runs LADA's *Study Room in Exile* from the Institute. Šimić is a live artist who works to camera as well as live. She has collaborated on performances with her children since the 1990s. She is politically active with the *Family Activist Network* and within the Labour Party in Liverpool.

<sup>64</sup> Andrea Liss is an American art historian and cultural theorist who focuses on feminist art, and in particular its relationship with the maternal.

<sup>65</sup> The metamorphosis that occurs in women's bodies in the stages of pregnancy and childbirth and the cycles of menstruation, which all disturb any attempt to strictly demarcate the body as a confined and neatly delineated entity.

this methodology as potentially radical because of the concerns of binary logic and traditional aesthetics, which ironically, objectify. Therefore, I have chosen to focus on maternal subjectivity rather than feminine subjectivity, because I concur with Liss that it retains a level of discomfort which can be exploited (Liss, 2013), and because as Stone argues ‘there has been a widespread tendency to understand the maternal body and the self in opposition’ (Stone, 2012, p. 10). My maternal aesthetics seeks to bridge this gap, and in this way subject-object distinctions disintegrate.

## **2:2 Deconstructing the Frame**

Derrida’s deconstruction of the Western aesthetic frame hinges on its indeterminacy (Derrida, 1987a), and in his reading the frame is unstable owing to the flawed pre-supposition of inside and outside as distinct. Derrida explores the notion, of a space which is between the image and the world, an indeterminate area that is in excess or additional to the image neither intrinsic to it nor extrinsic, and calls this the parergon in order, to reveal the instability of aesthetic processes. In short, what exists between the image and the world is a construct called the frame or the parergon (Derrida, 1987a) however, it is the presence of the frame that draws our attention to the constructed nature of the image. Ultimately, I would argue, this exposes the binary nature of traditional aesthetics in the West and sets off a chain reaction which destabilises other binaries. The parergon, as conceived by Derrida, as working both for and against the image by upholding a boundary whilst simultaneously making the boundary unfeasible is evident in the digital image, and how such images appear in the everyday. Here I will deploy the notion to address my research question: how does Derrida’s model of the parergon assist these explorations, and what relationship does the parergon share with Irigaray’s conception of the blind spot or reverse of the image as symbolic of the feminine?

I have already indicated the importance of the maternal for invoking and maintaining transitions within my practice. In this instance, the potential openings and excesses to aesthetics are realised in the maternal aesthetic and the symbolism of the female body. The practice, submitted with this thesis, has been the space with which to experiment, but also to challenge notions of the fixed frame through the introduction

of the maternal as disruptive to distinctions of interior/exterior and the introduction of maternal performance as opening or re-opening that original corridor between selves. Following Derrida's argument in the parergon section of his essay *The Truth in Painting* (1987a), the frame is already dissolving and is inherently unsuccessful at maintaining a clear outside and inside. Here, Derrida states that the frame:

[...] labors (travaille) indeed. Place of labor, structurally bordered origin of surplus value, i.e., overflowed (debordee) on these two borders by what it overflows, it gives (travaille) indeed. Like wood. It creaks and cracks, breaks down and dislocates even as it cooperates in the production of the product, overflows it and is deduc(t)ed from it (Derrida, 1987a, p. 75).

This is not simply a theoretical concern, rather it is manifested in my interest in the high-speed frame capture of digital cameras and in my construction of sequences of actions through still images, best illustrated in *MNWG* (2010), where I took a stop-frame animation approach to the images I produced. Derrida's argument hinges on the necessity that traditional aesthetics maintain distinctions between, for example, inside and outside, matter and form, as it is these very distinctions on which art relies to distinguish itself as aesthetic fine art. Derrida analyses Heidegger's essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1971) as a means to demonstrate the philosophical presuppositions made by Heidegger in relation to art, which he presents as a concept. For Heidegger, art is a means to get to, or draw out, the truth. How it has become culture, and how this precludes others, is not his concern, which is why Derrida interrogates his philosophical premise. Likewise, I am concerned with the presupposition that art is separate to life and the ways this prevents, and has prevented, women from engaging fully in aesthetics.

This assertion of the binary nature of art aesthetics, on the part of Derrida, is made possible because of the influential philosophy of Immanuel Kant and his distinction between natural beauty and the higher beauty found in aesthetics, in *Critique of Pure Reason*, first published in 1781 (Kant, 1934). In a patriarchal context, arguably such as we have inherited historically in the West, women have been assigned as nature or matter, the counterpoint being the cerebral high culture of man. Derrida utilises the symbolism of *the frame* and demonstrates its importance as an aesthetic device to maintain such distinctions. This encapsulates the difficulty of performing to the

camera, where the frame acts as a trap and, conversely, as a platform, and when I perform-to-camera I have to negotiate these contradictions.

Derrida's argumentation attempts to deconstruct Hegelian aesthetics through a critique of Heidegger's text *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1971), where Derrida (1987a) argued that Heidegger's essay presupposes a unity in the term 'art'. Derrida argues that the danger in this assumption of conceptual stability is that of believing that 'art has a meaning, one meaning' (Derrida, 1987a, p. 21). Derrida's analysis of the unifying symbolism of art as a false premise is important to women making art, because, 'woman' is also a false premise that pre-supposes conceptual stability. Although not explicitly stated by Derrida, the exclusion of matter and the originary distinction between art and nature form the patriarchal history that has excluded women's art as non-art, and has governed the representation of woman as 'matter' or non-subject. If traditional aesthetics deem matter as chaotic and, therefore, problematic and in need of framing (Derrida, 1987a), then it follows that the conceptualising of meaning as the inner content of a work that is reliant on the device of the frame, signals to the viewer that there is an ordered meaning to be read that has been organised by an outside entity – the artist.

Derrida contends that this binary of inner and outer is possible because the *physis/tekhne* opposition is irreducible (Derrida, 1987a, p. 21). 'If one were to accredit so hastily its translation as *nature/art* or *nature/technique*, one would easily commit oneself to thinking that art, being no longer nature, is history. The opposition nature/history would be the analogical relay of *physis/tekhne*' (ibid). In this section, Derrida is interested in how the history of art appears to dominate the philosophy of art. I use this quotation to demonstrate, as previously mentioned, the inherent patriarchal logic that dominates aesthetic processes, namely that matter needs be aestheticized or filtered and rendered something else by an act of framing that forms it as internal to a structure. This may sound sensible and innocuous, however, if the 'matter' referred to is actually women and their bodies, as is the case in Yves Klein's

performance<sup>66</sup>, then it is possible to critique aesthetics as phallogentric and controlling.

The frame is never a stable entity in my performances, nor in the performances that I have described. Rather, the frame manifests the stress of trying to uphold the binary distinction of what is the art and what is not as well as the stress of what is a unified subject. The *frame* encompasses not simply the pictorial, but also any form of staging or display of an object or event where aesthetics has been at play. The conditions of a framed space when conceived of as a threshold, or an attempt at, if not an actually successful, stepping outside of the everyday, demarcate the collapse of aforementioned binaries, like the perpetual mirror-phase threshold. Derrida maintains it is Kant's analytic of the beautiful, which sets up what Broadhurst describes as a 'critical dogmatism' (Broadhurst, 1999, p. 52), in perceiving the frame as a 'fixed border' (ibid), whereas the frame is a device which enables space for aesthetic and creative activity as it is marked by its failure to maintain an inside and an outside as distinct. Derrida argues that Kant sets up an oppositional logic where there are notions of 'formal and material' (Derrida, 1987a, p. 73), pure and impure, proper and improper, and inside and outside (ibid). For Derrida, the frame is inherently fragile, constructed as it is by Kant's analytic to maintain a border, and Derrida asserts that the frame 'both constitutes it and ruins it' (ibid). I am concerned with Derrida's exposure of the binary oppositions inherent within traditional Western aesthetics, and the frame's role within this process. The frame does not simply uphold these binaries but can also be a means with which to critique these processes. An analysis of the underlying power bias of which these philosophical systems are comprised in their privileging of certain viewpoints is evidenced in the writing of Pollock (1988), Grosz and Lippard (1995), Irigaray (1974), Kristeva (1984), Cavarero (2006) and Braidotti (1994).

Women artists, potentially, have an ideological disadvantage within this binary system, because *woman* in the traditional phallogentric logic is conceived of as property, or seen in her functionality as child-bearing and rearing, or more simply as

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<sup>66</sup> Discussed later in this chapter.



‘matter’ in the opposition form/matter, where the male artist will aestheticise the ‘raw’ subject, as previously discussed. In this phallogentric conceptual schema, it ‘suffices to associate’ rationality with the formal, and the ‘irrational with the illogical, the rational with the logical, [and] to couple the whole lot to the subject/object pair’ (Derrida, 1987, p. 65). This schema is derived, Derrida contends, from Christian philosophy. Although Derrida discusses the oppositional nature of thought at play within aesthetics, as theorised by Kant, he omits any mention of subject positions or gender politics, and without this type of reflection on women’s subjectivity, caught up as we are so often in the object position in this so-called Christian schema, this analysis on Derrida’s part remains apolitical.

In concurrence with theorists such as Irigaray (1974), Robinson (2006), Pollock (1988) and Grosz (1995), I would argue for the existence of a phallogentric subtext, which makes these oppositions and this type of dogmatism instrumental in upholding supremacy in the form of visibility. Derrida correctly theorises this type of thinking as violent upon the ‘thing,’ in that it is an aggressive superimposition ‘which enslaves it and, literally, conjugates it, under matter/ form’ (Derrida, 1987a, p. 67). The rendering representationally of woman as ‘thing,’ would constitute a form of enslavement which has been knowingly upheld, as well as subverted, in many artworks<sup>67</sup>. Furthermore, does a mother-artist’s inclusion of her child in the frame risk repeating this power dynamic by objectifying the child as ‘thing?’ To some degree, answers to these dilemmas can be sought within the logic of maternal aesthetics, through the suspension of the everyday allowed by the hybrid performance-photographic space, and through Derrida’s analysis that the frame is inherently unstable, based as it is in a mythology of inside and outside to which the frame draws attention through the parergon. This possibility of an in-between is indicated by Derrida, when he proposes that in the formation of subject/object as well as matter/form, similar to the parergon, there is a possibility of there being something else, something which is neither one nor the other (Derrida, 1987a, p. 67). I propose that the fluidity of the subject is symbolised by the maternal and its capacity to transcend the limitations of the postmodern conception of an isolated or fractured

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<sup>67</sup> Upheld, for example, in Klein’s treatment of women as material, and satirised by Cameron and Silver in the early 1990s which I discuss shortly.

subjectivity. In short, the maternal can both occupy different sites and time zones simultaneously and also muddy the distinctions between object and subject.

This in-between, described by Derrida as not one nor the other (Derrida, 1987a, p. 67), and by Jane Gallop<sup>68</sup> as not subject or object (Chernick and Klein (eds.) 2011, pp. 234-235), is occupied by the pregnant woman, and by the mother and child when maternal aesthetics is invoked inside or upon the frame. It is this indeterminacy between subjects which renders the work transitional and subversive, and it is partly the ethical ambiguities and precariousness of this that render the maternal as explosive to the binaries of patriarchal logic that are still, arguably, prevalent in Western thought. This is asserted by Cavarero (1995), who Braidotti claims is 'loyal to the methodological premises [of Irigaray]' (Braidotti in Cavarero, 1995, p. viii). Cavarero, like Irigaray, believes that the metaphysical tradition in the West has legitimised patriarchal power (ibid). She also contends that 'the noun "man" contains, buried in it, an absolute abstraction of the masculine, which is disembodied [...] built on a persistent dualism of body and mind' (Cavarero, 1995, p. 6), whereas "woman", 'finds she is a single whole of mind and body, and demands an adequate name' (ibid). Cavarero believes that this name, which, is sought by women, must 'resonate within the kind of symbolic order where birth [...] will also restore meaning to everyone, female and male' (ibid). Likewise, the explosiveness that Irigaray believes is held by the maternal, is because patriarchy has disavowed birth, choosing instead to thrive on death (Cavarero, 1995). Irigaray argues that conception and birth reproduce the question 'of her beginnings [...] and could insert woman into a specific economy that is genealogical and specular' (Irigaray, 1985, p. 76).

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<sup>68</sup> Jane Gallop is an American artist who works in the maternal aesthetic. She has an essay in Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein's book *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*, Chernick and Klein eds. (2011) The interesting thing about Gallop's essay, *Observations of a Mother*, is that she writes about performance-to-camera from the subject/object position. The work is a collaboration with her husband Dick Blau (who takes the photographs of her and her son). The images don't have titles; they just have the photographer's name and the date. For example, an image of Gallop lounging naked with her son is titled *Dick Blau* (1991). This is all somewhat problematic, as the masculine eye and the raw nature of the woman and child as his subjects would seem to reinforce normative values about masculine and feminine within aesthetic processes. However, Gallop theorises the process and finds agency this way.

In this way, I am convinced that Derrida's notion of the parergon opens up the frame so that the 'figure of the mother' and her symbolism cannot remain invisible any longer (Cavarero, 1995, p. 6). Cavarero maintains that birth and the mother are philosophically suppressed, because in the philosophical tradition they are so closely related to death 'in perfect symmetry as a coming from and a returning to nothingness' (Cavarero, 1995, pp. 46-47). She also seeks to dismantle this supposed symmetry, which is a construct within Western philosophy in a manner not dissimilar to Derrida's deconstruction of the supposed symmetry of the inner and outer in relation to the frame. The artificial relationship between death and birth, argues Cavarero, disavows the role of the womb and the mother in birth, and furthermore, to suggest we come from nothing is to suppress women's presence (Cavarero, 1995, pp. 44-47). Women's presence within philosophy is problematical because it disrupts the dichotomy between being and not being, which is a theoretical kernel of philosophy left over from Greek times (ibid). For these reasons, this philosophical tradition that obscures the mother (and birth), disregards her symbolism as a transformative being in the world, a being related to pleasure (Elizabeth Bell, 1995) in favour of a transcendental model formulated around death. Similarly, the frame literally takes the life from the artwork and preserves it for the museum or gallery. The question I am grappling with here is how to make photography work in this context as a creative impulse rather than as a disembodied mummified entity that lacks presence.

## 2:3 Performing the Maternal

With these attempts, both the successes and failures, to destabilise myths around femininity through the frame of the photograph already established as the context for my performance-to-camera, I will now address those aspects of my practice that might more traditionally be described as the interior of the image, intrinsic to it, or the subject-matter. In this instance, that is, myself and my daughter, and more broadly what our evolving relationship, both in front of, and away from the camera lens, conveys about phallogentric myths of the mother and daughter relationship and how the camera can establish a space to refute some of those aforementioned myths. Myths such as women as mute, women as passive, women as hysterical, women as pure matter/ bodies.

My performance, *MNWG* (2010) presents the maternal experience as a concept that transcends the factual requirements of being a mother, and in this way can be seen as a continuation of the personal, emotional and everyday conceived of as theoretical and conceptual within an artistic practice<sup>69</sup>. The transcendent potential of everyday mothering experiences re-configured as a maternal aesthetic<sup>70</sup> hinges, in part, on Adrienne Rich's<sup>71</sup> (1977) argument about the universal aspect of maternal symbolism, namely that we have all directly experienced the maternal and, therefore, it has a symbolic potential that lifts it above mere anecdote or worse, essentialism. This is evidenced in the resurgence of feminist theory on the maternal. For example, Gallop makes the distinction between the desire to mother, or to be a mother, as distinct from the desire to have a child (Chernick and Klein (eds.), 2011, p. 238). The latter she equates with the desire to become this impressive object that, for us, our

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<sup>69</sup> In the field of feminist art production the aim to prevent the sensory and everyday being suppressed and kept apart from intellectual or aesthetic processes, has been a major cause of critique. A good example is Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* from the late 1970s. Kelly insisted that her 'personal experience be read against a conceptual, psychoanalytical framework' (Chernick and Klein, 2011, p. 7).

<sup>70</sup> In the introduction to their LADA study room guide on *Live Art and Motherhood*, where my performance *My Nana's Wedding (Gown)* (Myfanwyn Ryan, 2010) is held, Šimić and her collaborator, Emily Underwood-Lee (another maternal aesthetics practitioner and theorist), argue that 'all artist/mothers [...] engage with a specific set of methodologies of performance/Live Art-making and inevitably develop a certain individual maternal performance aesthetic' (Šimić and Underwood-Lee, 2016, p. 4).

<sup>71</sup> Adrienne Rich, now deceased, was an incredibly influential American poet and writer of non-fiction, part of the women's liberation movement a feminist and civil rights activist. She wrote on motherhood and drudgery, poverty and inequality, and heterosexuality as a function of patriarchy rather than being biologically determined.

mothers once were (ibid, p. 238). Emily Jeremiah (2006) argues that feminist thought has been able to move away from the essentialist view of the maternal into a more poststructuralist position by shifting discussion away from the 'mother' and into 'mothering.' In other words, the act of mothering, rather than the subject – the mother. However, I am more in agreement with Liss, who continues to find the maternal body and the physical presence of the mother as troublesome to 'organised structures of power' (Liss, 2013, p. 1) but also vitally important. Through the performance of the maternal, we achieve what theory alone cannot, which is 'proclaiming maternal agencies, insisting on the presence of the mother' (ibid). According to Liss 'the maternal – with its always-lurking-at-the-surface possibilities, threats of pregnancy and menstruation – is looked at patriarchally as female bodies out of control, signs of oozing bodies through and in arts making' (Šimić and Underwood-Lee, 2016, p. 4), 'out to overtake others, viscosity out of bounds' (Liss, 2013, p. 1). In this context, the maternal takes the form of material, influence, and the meaning interior to the work – the maternal is intrinsic and extrinsic. These are the practical circumstances in which I find myself as a mother with duties of care, and which provide the impetus for my practice. However, these are more than practical circumstances they are an inherent threat to the stability of the aesthetic frame.

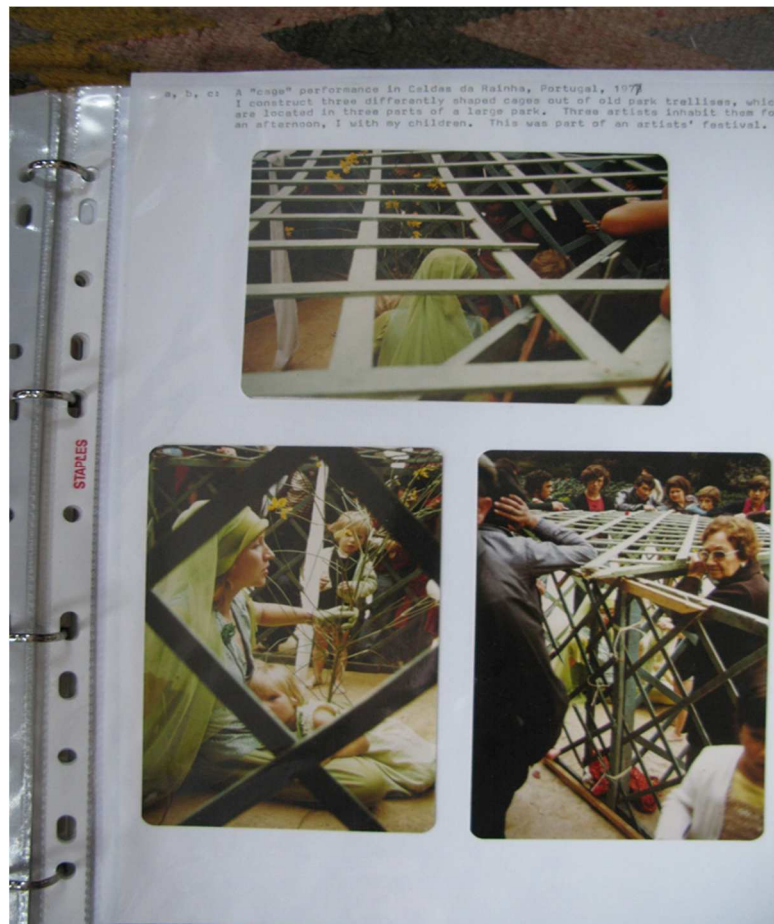


Fig. 8. *Cages*, Shirley Cameron with daughters Lois and Collette, (1977).

Following these theoretical and philosophical threads through maternal undercurrents and matricidal urges, *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012) is a series of work I made in collaboration with my eldest daughter, which situates itself in the maternal aesthetic context and questions both maternal separation from daughters and feminine subjectivity. The focus on the matrilineal and mother-daughter relationships is not exclusive. In Chapter Three I will discuss Šimić's acts of care with her son in her performance *Sid Jonah Anderson* (Lena Šimić, 2008), and later in this chapter, I discuss the collaboration between Cameron and Silver during the mid-1980s and 1990s<sup>72</sup>, and I will also discuss Lindsay Page's representation of maternal ambivalence as a counterpoint to obsessive and cloying stereotypes of motherhood.

The positioning of oneself as a mother-artist, and the placing of oneself and one's child in the frame (Fig. 8), is full of contradictions and problems within critical

<sup>72</sup> The focus remains on the maternal aesthetic, and specifically how this is expressed through women's connections to one another realised in matrilineal ties, as well as friendships, across time (Fig. 8).

discourses of essentialism and ethics. This is of critical importance within the Western fine art canon, as the depictions of love and jouissance<sup>73</sup> between mothers and daughters, grandmothers and granddaughters, and between women, are few (Stone, 2012). Maternal aesthetics poses some significant questions within a feminist framework, such as how to discuss and represent a mother's experience without invoking biological determinism, and how to address the child's lack of agency. I will further explore these issues in Chapter Three, however, my focus is engagement with the unwritten rules and norms surrounding a mother's behaviour, and therefore, my process responds creatively to the experience of these pre-suppositions first-hand. In this way, my practice is a continuation of feminist performance interventions with the camera and representational autonomy.

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<sup>73</sup> Conceived of here as excessive pleasure, abandonment, and letting oneself go. This work is a counterpoint to the repression and hysteria expressed in the work I discussed in Chapter One.

## 2:4 Towards a Maternal Performance Aesthetic

Before focusing on my maternal performance practice I should share the following quotation which highlights the cultural and political importance of maternal aesthetics:

Too often the mother has been invisible; a search through the creative and academic archives reveals she is often second to her child, reduced to a screen on which to project the antipathy, reverence or hatred of the central protagonist: she is the source of his problems or oedipal anxieties (Šimić and Underwood-Lee, 2016, p. 4).

This quotation, from Šimić and Underwood-Lee's introduction to the LADA study room guide on Live Art and Motherhood (2016), also presents some clues as to what could be construed as a maternal aesthetic. It seeks visibility for the mother; it aims to represent an active rather than passive mother; it refutes masculine phallogocentric anxieties about the mother and matricide; it breaks with conventions and taboos, and if there is unity amongst artist/mothers, it is in community rather than sameness.

The series *MSP with Matilda* (2011-12), five works in total, were conceived of as phenomenological explorations of the frame, and were created to continue the feminist deconstructions and critiques of traditional Western aesthetics (as discussed in Chapter One). The performances followed an emergent process where I improvised with my daughter to explore notions of being, in an ontological sense. To consider how this undoes the often disassociating and distancing effects of Western aesthetics, I will now discuss the power of maternal symbolisms in feminist discourse, their repression in phallogocentrism, and what is at stake in my representation of myself as a mother.

Stone argues that Irigaray overstates the degree to which our culture is symbolically matricidal (Stone, 2012). The disavowal of the maternal in Western civilization is paradoxical, as it is both venerated and repressed. Certainly, Irigaray exaggerates this process to expose the maternal undercurrents in, for example, Freud and Plato, as well as in Christianity, all of which draw on the mother's importance and centrality to life, philosophy and theology. Irigaray identifies the maternal emphasis in Plato's



cave as a metaphor for the womb (Irigaray, 1985, p. 243), the place which man must leave to find truth. Stone maintains that in a traditional way of thinking ‘the mother is deemed important [...] on the basis that she lays the selfhood of her children’ (Stone, 2012, p. 51). Hence, Stone draws together the seemingly conflicted position that the mother occupies in the West, as both idealised and erased, by explaining that motherhood is presented ‘as the role by which mothers free their children from the maternal realm construed as bad, dangerous, and in need of being left behind’ (ibid, p. 52). The mother is foundational for the subject but when she has performed that function must be discarded<sup>74</sup>. Julia Kristeva<sup>75</sup>, deploys the term matricide, rather than the more simply put and less emotive term ‘separation’, because she is not describing a ‘neutral cognitive process’ (Stone, 2012, p. 66). Rather, Kristeva argues that the child’s development is an intensely bodily process. Stone contends that the child performs a form of matricide through viscerally ‘putting the mother outside of oneself’ (ibid, p. 67) however, she turns this linear developmental progression on its head by describing how we regress towards our own infancy later in life (Stone, 2012, pp. 120-121).

This regression is because the daughter, on becoming a mother herself, experiences again the intensity of the ‘body-to-body relation’ she had with her own mother with her daughter, and this ‘takes the mother back to her pre-Oedipal past’ (ibid). Feminist theorist, Rosemary Betterton<sup>76</sup>, argues that Irigaray, like Kristeva, sees ‘the repressed maternal relationship and the pre-Oedipal state of infancy as central within the formation of gendered subjectivity’ (Betterton, 1996, p. 16). In more established psychoanalytical Freudian theories that are a subject of critique for Irigaray, Betterton, Stone *et al*, feminine gender identity is full of shame and resentment. Stone claims that in this framework of separation the mother must be almost purged

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<sup>74</sup> Such notions of *using* and *discarding* fit with a phallogentric conception of women’s passivity.

<sup>75</sup> Kristeva is a (Bulgarian born, based in France) feminist, psychoanalyst and cultural critic. Like Irigaray, she has been writing since the 1970s in, what is generally termed, the second wave feminism, which addresses patriarchy through structures. Kristeva has focused on language as a patriarchal tool of oppression, which she sought to critique through considering poetics, abjection and her ‘semiotic realm’, a pre-oedipal space that the infant inhabits prior to forming a subjectivity. The subject is conceived of as a process rather than as a fixed, stable or unified entity (French & Lack, 1998, pp. 133-178).

<sup>76</sup> Betterton is based at Lancaster University and writes on maternal subjectivity and women’s bodies in art.

from us; according to phallogentric logic, and this is particularly difficult for the young girl because it requires her to deny her mother's presence.

The pre-Oedipal past described by Stone as the place to which a mother returns, is certainly influenced by Kristeva's semiotic, as she describes it as a time before self-identification and prior to 'linguistic frameworks' (Stone, 2012, pp. 120-121). The continued connection with this past presents a radical perspective in theorisations of the mother-daughter relationship, because it is the antithesis of separation. In this way, the mother precedes and exceeds selfhood. Traditionally, where the mother must push the child away to initiate that sense of self in the infant (Stone, 2012), in a feminist re-working of phallogentric psychoanalytical, philosophical and aesthetic tradition, we are not concerned to uphold or insist on the separations laid out by theorists such as Freud and Lacan. The push away occurs, but is challenged, to propose a new subjective position where the mother can remain an active agent. Through the performances I have made with my daughter, I argue for subjectivity as negotiation and this is always intersubjective and process-based. Even to ask the question "is emotional separation necessary?" is an act of resistance to underlying notions of mothering that are repressive to mothers and daughters, such as martyrdom and moving apart from each other<sup>77</sup>. The maternal aesthetic process that I want to explore in this chapter is not an *interpretation* of motherhood, but an *embodied enactment* of motherhood and a visceral and emotive, as well as somewhat obsessional, response to the same and this is a radical gesture.

Artist/mother Bernadette Laimbauer has produced a series of performances in collaboration with her infant daughter, Matilda (2016-2017), and she explained to me that she began to perform with Matilda because, in her words, 'there was simply no other opportunity<sup>78</sup>' (Laimbauer, 2017) to make performance other than when they were together. She describes the necessity, the urge and the desperation to continue artistic production whilst caring for an infant. I asked Laimbauer about her maternal aesthetic process:

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<sup>77</sup> There are many archetypes for the mother. The omnipotent, the controlling, the clingy, the manipulative, the evil, the nurturing, the sadistic, the cold, the neurotic, and so on.

<sup>78</sup> Conversation with the Artist. See the Appendix.

I wanted to do my performance, Matilda wanted to be with me. So she became part of the performance very naturally. I realized it might be very easy to combine spending time with my child and being productive [...]. Matilda shows interest in an action or material, I take the action/material and set myself a task with it.

The task usually has to do with repetition. How Matilda participates is up to her. We never arrange anything before we start performing (Laimbauer, 2017<sup>79</sup>).

Laimbauer calls these 'performative sketches' and explained how she 'catches them with a camera to look at our actions. Somehow they are a kind of training for me, to accept unexpected things, to deal with a situation and Matilda plays' (ibid, 2017).



Fig. 9. *backe kuchen milch* – (performanceserie mit kind), Bernadette Laimbauer with Matilda Laimbauer, (2016).

Laimbauer also described to me the importance of the performance's title in relation to her process with Matilda and how the work and their relationship is interconnected:

The title is *bake milk cake* – (performance series with child). There's a German song Matilda loves to listen to. It's about baking a milk cake, and the milk might end soon as one of our biggest physical, emotional connections. The milk, is running out and something new will come (Laimbauer, 2017).

With regard to this milk, Irigaray argues how 'milk, is able to nourish but also kill, rape or poison the sexuate body of the child' (Irigaray, 1985, p. 37). Irigaray points to the seductiveness of the mother and the rich ties to the mother possessed by the little girl, but she is surprised by the fact that in Freud's conception, the attachment to the mother ends in hate (ibid). Irigaray is clear on the ambivalent nature of the

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<sup>79</sup> Laimbauer wrote to me about this performance in 2017. I have included the transcript with the oral history recordings.

maternal as representative of femininity in Freud's writing, where the maternal needs de-activating, where the 'dangerous, the embracing, the aggressive mother/body' is as much a threat as a source of comfort (ibid, p. 37). Irigaray also questions Freud's assumption, that devotion to the father must denigrate the love once held for the mother. She argues that the result of this is that 'the little girl comes to devalue her own sex by devaluing her mother's' (ibid, p. 40). In short, such a process, defined by increasing hostility towards the mother from the girl-child is damaging for the girl's self-esteem.

When I performed in the photography studio with my daughter Matilda, I was in the process of weaning her, and she was discovering more of a sense of her autonomous self, as was I, having almost forgotten what 'alone' felt like after my journey to the pre-oedipal realm. Irigaray claims, and I would concur, that there is a trauma elicited through weaning because it is, in her words, 'the final break' for the infant of the 'material contact with the inside of the mother's body' (ibid, p. 40) in a phallogocentric order. My performance-to-camera with my daughter does not explicitly deal with breastfeeding, but following Stone's analysis, the work can certainly be viewed as negotiating maternal symbolisms. Here is the push-and-pull of mother-daughter relationships.

With this push-and-pull in mind, my brief disappearances in *MSP with Matilda* (2011-12) could be viewed as preparatory steps in the process of weaning and the impending trauma of separation from the interior of the maternal body, symbolised in 'the denial of the breast' (Irigaray, 1985, p. 40), except that I confound this by re-appearing in a manner that draws parallels with *MNWG* (2010). This communicates two things. Firstly, the process is non-linear, since the relationships ebb and flow, sometimes they stop and start, and sometimes they break entirely, although this is not inevitable. Secondly, who is in pain? Matilda is not always concerned at my disappearance as she is beginning to feel safe while alone.

Irigaray states that ‘the urge to devour the mother, to destroy the original nature-body<sup>80</sup>’ (ibid, p. 40), stems from this ‘inevitable separation,’ one that we must ‘eternally return and refer back to’ (ibid). Eating the mother offers a solution to this eternal return to the trauma of separation, except that:

If [the mother] is eaten, she will no longer be there to serve your needs-desires or to guarantee a certain representation of the place of origin and the original bond. So this “hunger” [for contact with the material causes of the child’s body] is indeed insatiable, and no food will ever satisfy it. In fact it is not a matter of its being satisfied (ibid).

This mother that we eat does not appear to have much to say in the matter. Jessica Benjamin<sup>81</sup> argues that ‘for Freud, woman’s renunciation of sexual agency and her acceptance of object status are the very hallmark of the feminine’ (Benjamin, 1990, p. 87). In addition to this, and the subsequent rejection of Freud’s definition, Benjamin asserts that ‘even today, femininity continues to be identified with passivity, with being the object of someone else’s desire, with having no active desire of one’s own’ (ibid). In relation to motherhood, a woman who complains, or desires a separate identity outside of the mother role, is often defined through maternal ambivalence, which is rather limiting. In my work in the studio with Matilda, there is the active re-establishment of the subjectivity of both mother and daughter through interaction and playfulness however, there is an unsettling edge to the play expressed in my concealment and her confusion, which swiftly turns to delight. Through these performances to camera, I test the degree to which I, whilst representing a mother, can retain or establish subjectivity as a woman.

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<sup>80</sup> It is my opinion that the use of the image of breast feeding is partly symbolic. One reason for strongly emphasising the body as playing such a vital role in mothering is to make a provocation and demonstrate the embodied nature of the relationship between an infant and its mother. The image of breast milk is also provocative, because it represents a woman as active rather than passive.

<sup>81</sup> Jessica Benjamin is a contemporary American feminist psychoanalyst who considers problems of domination, subject formation, gender difference, authority and sexual relations.

## 2:5 Mother-Daughter Relationships

I will now look more closely at some of the tensions and contradictions that arise from mother-daughter relationships, where the theoretical and narrative flow of seeking something which remains hidden continues to play out. The concealments and reveals that make subjectivity fluid are performed in *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012) as a game between mother and child. If we can accept that the mother simultaneously embodies both nurture and poison for the infant then this is potent in the pleasure and peril of our game (*MSP with Matilda*, 2011-2012), where the nature of power is challenged and re-configured between us as we take turns to hide. As a result the underlying assumptions are questioned, foregrounded in Freudian narratives of separation and disavowal of the mother/the feminine, which I have just discussed via Stone's and Irigaray's theorisations of mother-daughter relationships. Following Irigaray, Stone argues that since women's loss of their mothers is repressed and remains unconscious, the birth of a girl child brings it to the fore. For women, this loss can become a form of intense over-identification and a denial of the daughter having any real autonomy to the mother (Stone, 2012). Certainly, my own attempts to fit, both literally and figuratively, inside my grandmother's wedding dress can be seen as symbolising this process, as can my repetitive sequences with Matilda in the photography studio, where, at least for a time, we are unable to move past that stage. In the image below, it is possible to read Cameron's performance with her daughters as creating a maternal realm that is both a part of, and also *apart* from, the rest of society. She is representing the confined space in which mother-daughter relationships are able to exist culturally whilst spectators crowd around the cage and peer in at the occupants. Cameron also presents a degree of ambivalence in her role as mother, trapped, othered and scrutinised.



Fig. 10. *Cages*, Shirley Cameron with her daughters Colette and Lois, (1977).

Stone questions what constitutes some of the actual concrete features of typical mother-daughter relationships (Stone, 2012), and asserts that there is a surprising gap on this when it comes to reviewing writing on mothering. Much of the theorising has been done either by men or by women with sons, and when feminist psychoanalysts have explored this topic they have tended to focus on mother-daughter relationships as problematic (ibid). For example, Stone refers to Helene Deutsch's argument, formulated in 1945, that Freud is incorrect to argue that the mother has a baby as a substitute penis. Rather, she argues, the mother has a baby to return to the 'early conditions of her own life' (Stone, 2012, p. 114). Thus, to merge with her child is to re-unite with her (own) 'long-lost mother' (ibid, p. 115). If I consider *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012) in this way, as in Deutsch's term, a 'psychic umbilical cord' (ibid), then the process of play and the depiction of the interactions between us are an attempt to rediscover my lost relationship with my own mother. The sense of being lost and found certainly fits with our game of hide-and-seek, and the underlying terror that I felt at the thought of leaving Matilda can be explained as the fear of separation destroying me once again (Stone, 2012), as it did when I was an infant. In a similar spirit, Cameron's interactions with her twin daughters (Fig. 10.) can also be viewed as the establishing of a shared space in which they can play and interact. However, I suspect there is a degree of resignation in the gesture Cameron makes of being publicly confined with her daughters.

With regard to the specific nature of my collaborations with Matilda being performed-to-camera, for me, hiding from the camera is a return to the need to be seen and recognised by the 'other,' or to be seen conforming to particular mythologies. Mythologies, such as an obsession with 'perfection'<sup>82</sup>. Continued commentary and intervention in the digital realm is absolutely necessary, especially because of the proliferation of digital images and the widespread availability of image capture devices in the Western world. All of which has resulted in a weary audience which is desensitised to the notion that women are not equal to their male counterparts. Maternal aesthetics is a renewed form of expression of feminine subjectivity and collective experience, born from these cultural circumstances and the theoretical torpor created as a result of over analysis of the gaze, coupled with the theoretical inability to universalise experience from an ethical and critical viewpoint. The maternal conflicts with the mechanism of the camera, as it is difficult to uphold the insistence on the camera as a neutral intermediary when it has been granted a specific performative function as relational facilitator or representational tool.

I argue that when the camera is combined with the maternal aesthetic, new ground can be established. Kristeva asserts that through art we can re-enter the semiotic or pre-linguistic primal state of the infant (Betterton, 1996), while Betterton contends that the suggestion made by Kristeva is that 'the artist and the mother represent two points of entry into the same experience' (ibid, pp. 40-41). Crucially, here the difference is that 'the artist may represent the maternal state, the mother may not 'represent' herself' (ibid). Betterton also maintains that Kristeva, in delineating this nuance between interpretation, representation and enactment, thereby upholds a binary. However, I maintain the subject-less position of the mother, stems from the phallogentric nature of the traditional Western aesthetic process, which is both disassociating and binary. Kristeva points out that fine art aesthetics are presented in phallogentrism as akin to birth, and also superior to it, or so we are led to believe.

Does this lead towards the possibility of a revised relationship with the camera, and through it, representation? Is it a relationship that does not hinge on phallic

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<sup>82</sup> Perfection is satirised in the work of Woods in her *Fat Fucking Shrek Cunt series* (2015), where she explores her obsessional relationship with the selfie and Kardashian.



domination of the visual field in the form of 'othering'? Is it a relationship to the camera that does not construct a removal of spectator and subject from each other, and can at times become a joyous and humorous process that is, first and foremost, relational? It certainly proposes the possibility of creativity and fluidity, where the camera may be viewed as a means with which to interject in the tendency to oppose mother and child. In the words of Liss, 'rather than construing the mother-child relation as an essentialised binding, the coupling can be embraced as yielding the fruits of reciprocal relations' (Chernick and Klein, 2011, p. 82).

I argue that this concern for the relational aspects and reciprocity between mother and child prevents my work (or the work of Cameron or Šimić) becoming ethically mired in the charge of exploitation, as has occurred for the artists Mann (Woodward, 1992) and Gearon (Gearon, 2001). In Gearon's case, the police came to inspect her work in the exhibition *I am Camera* (2001), after it had been reported as obscene. Hirsch believes there is more at stake here than reading the mother as phallic or monstrous, for example, in the critique of Mann's work there is arguably a tendency to present mothers behind the camera as potentially harmful to their children, rather than appreciating the intense scrutiny under which the mother is placed, and the fact that empowerment flows from, not to, the maternal gaze (Hirsch, 1997). Hirsch contends that Mann's portraits are representations of the mother, rather than objectifications of her children (ibid, pp. 153-154<sup>83</sup>). Gearon amplifies this undertone of insipid moralising of the mother artist's role by, for example, being photographed in a monster mask and making one of her daughters cry<sup>84</sup>.

Liss concurs with Rich's assertion that the concept of maternal sacrifice is part of the 'unexamined assumptions [...] that a "natural" mother is a person without further identity [...], that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless' (Rich, 1977, p. 22). Mann's practice is a direct challenge to these assumptions, because we are

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<sup>83</sup> Mann likes to push boundaries in her work. She went on to photograph rotting corpses for her book *What Remains* (2003), while herself remaining steadfastly out of view behind the camera, which is challenging in itself towards conventional conceptions of feminine roles, including how we care and what we care about. On Mann and her relationship with the camera, Hirsch explained how 'when I look, I am seen' (Hirsch, 1997, p. 176) to which I would add, judged.

<sup>84</sup> Tierney Gearon's *Mother Project* (2006), is not intended to exploit her family. Rather, as she explains in the narration of the film, she sees it as 'healing' (Gearon, 2006).

aware of her indulging her creative impulses and exposing her children, seemingly for her own ends. My representations of my own relationship with my daughter, structured as they are around enjoyment and our playing together, also break with the link between motherhood and maternal suffering (Stone, 2016), because we are depicted taking pleasure in each other. The obviously staged environment of the work, which begins to collapse over time (Fig. 11. below), is another method of drawing the viewers' attention back to the image as construct, by not allowing them to buy into the image as authentic. Examinations of the disconnection between representation and experience is a common thread in women's performance. More generally, I would argue that it is realised both explicitly and implicitly when women perform with their children.



Fig. 11. *MSP with Matilda*, Myfanwyn Ryan, (2011-2012).

Simultaneous to the subversive depiction of the disruption of mother and baby, is the broader disruption of a myth of a reality that is mundane and which offers no seduction; a reality of drudgery in which a woman may quite feasibly find herself

trapped. This lack of domesticity, and this lack of the pressing reality of care and chores, is seeping into the fiction of the image in *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012), and in this instance, it politicises the representations through the decadent absurdity of the process. It is a politicised act, or at least a radicalised representation of such, because of a lack of power and visibility felt by mothers in many geographical locations, coupled with the intense sense of helplessness that descended over me whilst I was pregnant, giving birth and child rearing.



Fig. 12. *MSP with Matilda*, Myfanwyn Ryan, (2011-2012).

Here because the disruption of subjectivity and physicality is, arguably, uniquely bound to women, how does a woman reconcile the disruption to her body and her life after having given birth to and nursing a child? Secondary to this, working with images inevitably encompasses aspects of vanity and representation, and the particular problem which is quickly encountered is how to appear natural, how to be a woman (Fig. 12). In fact, I would argue that the problematic nature of subjectivity is inherent in the act of being photographed (Barthes, 2000, pp. 10-11), where we switch between subject and object positions. I believe in the process and know that beautiful images are, however seductive, simply a by-product of my closed performances (*MSP with Matilda*, 2011-2012) that were only viewed by camera and

cameraman. To accomplish my aim of a deconstruction of processes of aesthetic distancing and re-establishment of phallogentric ideology, it is necessary to be wary of the seduction of the image. It is a flat glossy surface and it is beguiling but what I seek is obscured, at the outer limits and also on the reverse. The frame represents the capacity of the camera to objectify, and I am wary that ultimately it is impossible to control perception or subjectivity, because simultaneously the frame is an act of control and the moment that control collapses. A definition of woman within a maternal aesthetic is that; woman is an act of becoming and simultaneously the dissolution of any subjective stability. Photography, in its insistence on a frame, always suggests there is a pushing at the outer limits of definition and perception, and at the limits of what is tangible and what is not. The combination of the camera's inherent instability which is born out of its overreliance on a frame, and women's inherent instability as a subject always in the process of emerging, and the maternal which often breaks taboos and mythologies, results in an effective critique of traditional Western aesthetics and phallogentrism.

## 2.6 Lack, Excess and Mimesis

To establish this encounter with the maternal and performance-to-camera philosophically, I utilise Irigaray's analysis of phallocentrism as a repression of the feminine, together with Derrida's meditations on the impossibility of preventing the collapse of the frame. In short, I assert that it is impossible to repress the feminine and similarly it is not possible to maintain closely guarded binaries, since both will eventually cave in on themselves. Through the mother, I can access a referent that symbolises my subjective instability and the many ways I am both repressed and I am oppressor, and the many ways I am other. Kristeva argues that the mother lives on in the adult psyche as a fantasy or 'lost continent' (Stone, 2012, pp. 120-121), or as a religious idea. The daughter's search for the mother in my performances is meaningful and poignant because of the immense absence across time and the historical attempts to erase the importance of the mother-child relationship.

Feminist methodology (Irigaray, 1974, Ettinger, 2006, Liss, 2011) contends that this mother-daughter/granddaughter relationship I am depicting is overlooked in Freudian/Lacanian analysis of the origins of subjectivity, which revolve around castration and penis envy<sup>85</sup>. In Irigaray's *Speculum* (1974), the issue of women's representation is manifested as lack, or a blind spot, which is because, for Irigaray:

[...] woman has no gaze, no discourse for her specific specularization that would allow her to identify with herself (as same) [...]. Hence, woman does not take an active part in the development of history, for she is never anything but the still undifferentiated opaqueness of sensible matter, the store (of) substance for the sublation of self, all being as what is, or what he is [...] (Irigaray, 1985, p. 224).

In the staging of a game of 'hide-and-seek' from the camera <sup>86</sup>, daughters/mothers/grandmothers, take on a resistant function when considered in the context of a culture which attempts to suppress the importance of the 'maternal space from which all subjects emerge' (Schor, 1994, p. 64).

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<sup>85</sup> In Chapter Three, where I will be discussing Benjamin's analysis of intersubjective interactions based on mutual recognition, it is evident that the importance of mother-child interaction has been much more central in child developmental theories for the last 25 years, at least since the emphasis has shifted increasingly to earlier developmental stages (Benjamin, 1990, p. 12).

<sup>86</sup> I refer to both *MNWG* (2010) and *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012).

The mother-daughter relationship remains potentially unsettling to more mainstream mythologies, because it can operate autonomously from the phallic economy and symbolises different expressions of love and desire, physicality and sensuality, or what Irigaray has termed *jouissance*<sup>87</sup>. In psychoanalytical terms, the anxiety of castration<sup>88</sup> is what, arguably, brings on an insistence on covering up the mother, the nude, nothing, where, in this instance, that covering is the frame acting as it does in the non-designated space of not-image and not beyond image. Coupled with the strict regulation of inner and outer that the frame polices, used, amongst other things, to stave off any references to women's apparent lack coupled with all their unknowability, they are from that 'dark continent'<sup>89</sup> of femininity (Irigaray, 1985, p. 110) or in Derridean terms the abyss<sup>90</sup>.

On the parergon (Derrida, 1987a, pp. 37- 82) Derrida writes about the clothing on statues as being in addition to the image, and thereby another example of a parergon. It is neither an internal nor an extrinsic element of the image (ibid, p. 57). The clothing acts as something which both 'decorates' and 'veils' their beauty (ibid, p. 57). Derrida is right to identify this 'veil' as pushing at the edge of both the artwork and the represented body, as the frame pushes at the limits of reality. He asks 'what is it that is lacking in the representation of the body so that the garment should come

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<sup>87</sup> *Jouissance* translates as enjoyment, which Lacan develops as essentially phallic term in that it is not related to the other *Encore* (Lacan, 1972-1973), whereas for Irigaray, it points much more towards repressed feminine pleasure that is not derived from the genitals (Irigaray, 1985).

<sup>88</sup> Irigaray talks about women's supposed lack of value in a phallogocentric world where their only invention has been weaving. This is heavily ironic on Irigaray's part, as she states that 'woman can, it seems, (only) imitate nature [...] but this is paradoxical. Since nature is all' (Irigaray, 1985, p. 115). Therefore, because nature is all and cannot appear as *no thing* (ibid), then women weave to veil their lack 'to mask the faults of Nature, and restore her in her wholeness. *By wrapping her up*' (ibid, p. 115). The 'wrapping' or the veil, function for Freud as a means of hiding difference from the 'horrible gaze of the little boy, and the man' (Irigaray, 1985, p. 115).

<sup>89</sup> Andrea Liss argues that the political project for feminism, as outlined, she asserts, by Rosi Braidotti, is now to shift the definition of woman away from that idea of a 'dark continent', or 'eternal masquerade' and re-embody femininity through 'essentialism with a difference' (Myrel and Chernick, 2011, p. 80). Although not specifically my aim here, Liss is aligning maternal aesthetics within this new branch of essentialism. In short insisting on biological difference can be an empowering move for women when they are confined within a culture that often suppresses the body and experiences such as child birth and pregnancy.

<sup>90</sup> 'The analogy of the abyss [...] is an analogy between two absolutely heterogeneous worlds' (Derrida, 1987, p. 36). Furthermore Derrida describes weaving and folding back cloth as ways to save yourself from 'falling into the bottomless depths' (ibid, p. 37), of said abyss. Although he is not directly referencing gender politics or feminine subjectivity, here I am appropriating the idea of an absence and the subsequent anxiety it induces to those ends.

and supplement it?’ (Derrida, 1987a, pp. 57-58)<sup>91</sup>. My response, is that this wrapping is designed to deliver the depiction of femininity to us in a way that does not create horror in the male gaze. In other words, the question would, more aptly be, what is at stake in representing the body completely unadorned? It is no coincidence that for Irigaray the ‘veil’ or ‘wrapping,’ is designed to alleviate masculine castration anxiety; following her close reading of Freudian psychoanalytical theory in *Speculum* (1974), while for Derrida, it alludes to, whilst attempting to suppress, the inherent lack or emptiness at the centre of any artwork. This is because both Irigaray and Derrida make attempts to challenge aesthetic presuppositions inherited from the classical era when art was deemed secondary to life in its status as a representation<sup>92</sup>.

The traditional consignment of the feminine as “substance” or interior for aesthetic art<sup>93</sup> was the topic of Silver and Cameron’s performance, *The Swinging Sixties: We Were There* (Cameron, Silver, 1992<sup>94</sup>) (Fig. 13.), at Nottingham Women’s Centre, was constructed around their awareness that the audience would be solely women and that this would be intrinsic to the critique of spectatorship of the female form legitimised as high culture in fine art. This performance is clearly a critique of Yves Klein’s *Anthropométrie de la Période Bleue* (1960), body performance.

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<sup>91</sup> Derrida does not correlate women’s phallic lack with the use of a parergon in the form of a veil as directly representative of castration anxiety, nor does he explicitly bring the veil to bear as a supplement for this absence. This is despite him using a female nude ‘Cranach’s Lucretia’ (Derrida, 1987a, p. 58) to illustrate his point about items that exceed the image through not being integral. If we relate this to Irigaray the veil may actually prove more integral than initially supposed.

<sup>92</sup> Aristotle’s argument that art merely imitates life, is refuted in Heidegger’s essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1950), where he attempts to persuade us that art speaks of a higher truth and creates or opens worlds.

<sup>93</sup> Activity is associated with control and exteriority, and passivity with submission and interiority (Ettinger, 2006, pp. 78-79).

<sup>94</sup> As well as Yves Klein’s performance, they also performed a version of Yoko Ono’s *Cut*, and performed their version of *Bagism* which was part of John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s peace campaign in the 1960s. *Bagism* provides a different reading of matter to Klein’s, where in this instance, climbing inside the bag allows all participants to be just matter and, thereby, free from cultural constraints.



Fig.13. *The Swinging Sixties: We Were There*, Evelyn Silver and Shirley Cameron, (1992).

It has been argued that in Klein's work, the nude female performers are configured as *matter* for Klein, who, as the 'artist', gets to 'form' them. Jane Blocker argues that for Klein 'the flesh, which the female models simply and self-evidently are, is known, dominated, and distanced [...] presented as nature' (Blocker, 2004, p. 67). In the first instance, this is achieved through the performance of traditional fine art aesthetics which revolve around what Irigaray has described as 'poles of matter' and their separation from culture, and secondly, through the distancing and framing effect of the camera. Blocker believes that at the time of this work, Klein's manifesto, was 'ideologically dangerous in its gendering of nature' (ibid, p. 68). In other words, this work is heavily reliant on patriarchal binaries that are over-invested in women's alleged inherent passivity and potential maternity and metaphors of their fertility, for example, as 'nourishing soil' (Stone, 2012, p. 51). According to Joanna Hodge, Irigaray seeks to destabilise the notion that philosophy is gender neutral (Hodge, 1994), and she achieves this by an act of mimesis that allows her an 'autonomous philosophical voice' (ibid, p.198). She then uses this voice to 'open up reverberations within the texts of male, masculinist thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas and Foucault' (ibid). Hodge further argues that *Speculum* is a 'work of self-constitution that operates by retrieving moments in the philosophical and psychoanalytical tradition at which the silencing of women and murdering of mothers are both marked and repressed' (ibid, p. 193).



Silver and Cameron's critique of Klein's original methodology, was that the performance was aimed at an all-female audience who were not specifically educated in art. Their performance was heavily reliant on the representational power of their bodies as mature women's bodies, a departure from Klein's 'nubile' women, bodies that had experienced child-birth (on the part of Cameron), and bodies that were more generally lived-in and aged. Silver and Cameron had originally intended to wear body stockings as they were unsure how comfortable the audience would be in the presence of nudity, which Silver felt had again become rather taboo during the 1990s. However, according to Silver:

[...] later in the evening we abandoned the body stockings and stripped and threw paint at each other and rolled on the paper. We felt totally free and liberated. Our purpose had been to reclaim the original Yves's Klein performances involving nubile young women. (Cameron and I were both in our early to mid-forties when we performed our version.) It was performed in the context of a non-commercial non-art world environment, framed as a 'cabaret' in a community centre, so we were free from those constraints' (Silver, 2016<sup>95</sup>)

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<sup>95</sup> The full conversation can be found in the oral histories included in the appendix.

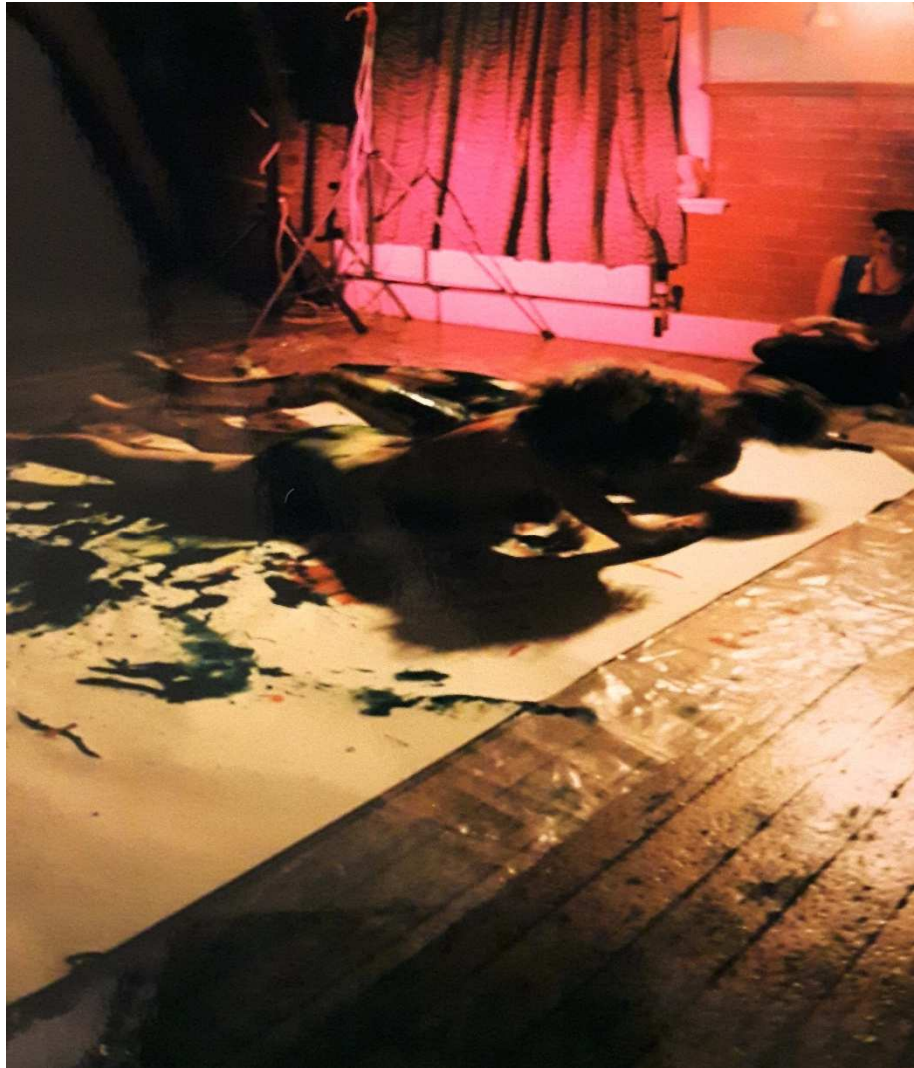


Fig. 14. *The Swinging Sixties: We Were There*, Evelyn Silver and Shirley Cameron, (1992).

The constraints, to which Silver refers, are described by Jill Dolan as 'perhaps [due to] a more elitist avant-garde' audience (Dolan, 1993, p. 152). These types of constraints did not exist in community settings. In the words of Dolan, a cabaret, or non-proscenium arch staging can 'profoundly disturb the standard one-way direction of the gaze' (Dolan, 1993, p. 154). Of course, the cabaret format also brings the re-staging of a 1960s fine art performance back into popular culture, completing a full circle of elevation to fine art and back again to entertainment via ironic trivialisation. I would argue that the material is deployed ironically within Silver and Cameron's feminist critique to destabilise the work's universal truths about women occupying a space closer to nature through lowering its stature to mere 'entertainment' (Fig. 14. and Fig. 15).



Fig. 15. *The Swinging Sixties: We Were There*, Evelyn Silver and Shirley Cameron, (1992).

If the above work can be read as the excess of femininity expressed through the flesh and abandonment in the moment then the photographic work of Canadian artist Lyndsay Page<sup>96</sup>, performed to camera with her (un-named) daughter in *Spawn*, (2007) is at the opposite end of that spectrum and expresses an overwhelming lack. There is a visible disconnection or ambivalence between the mother and daughter that differs from the sensation apparent in my own games with Matilda. In one of the images from *Spawn* (2007 - ongoing), Page lies in a meadow of long grass, where she is concealed, apart from her hand and her arm which appear to be signalling to her daughter above the long grass. At the forefront of the image, her daughter crawls in search of her mother. There is a suggestion of abandonment, coupled with a suggestion that the mother, the child, or both, may be in some sort of peril. This is echoed in another image from *Spawn* (n.d.) in which the baby lies on a bed, seemingly blissfully unaware that her mother is under it with only her legs protruding out. This last image is a parallel image to one from my own series in the studio with Matilda, where my legs protrude from the black drapes, although in my case there is an element of seduction rather than distress. Page describes her process as, being

<sup>96</sup> Cited in the introduction to this chapter as one of my contemporaries because of the way she collaborates with her daughter in front of the lens.

made in response to how she felt emotionally when her daughter was born. She is often absent or inert in the images, the inference is that she feels this way as a subject. This impression is evidenced in the following quotation from Page, in which she describes performing as a mother as a conflicted stance; ‘when my daughter was born, I felt overwhelmed by a sense of disappearance, that my self-identity (and my identity as an artist) was being eclipsed by this generic label of “Mother.”’ (Page, 2012).



Fig. 16. *MSP with Matilda*, Myfanwyn Ryan, (2011-2012)



Fig. 17. *MSP with Matilda*, Myfanwyn Ryan, (2011-2012).

I was unaware of Lindsay Page's *Spawn* (2007 - ongoing) when undertaking similar practice, however, I can relate to her feeling that she would disappear. She formulated a methodology around the experience of motherhood and the urge to resist erasure and invisibility, as did I. Grosz contends that women continue to be silenced through the endless metaphorization of femininity, which is evident from Plato through to Derrida (Grosz, 1995, p. 124). For Grosz, the maternal body is 'made to carry the burden of what it is that men cannot explain [...] what men continue to represent as an abyss' (ibid). Both Page and I have wrested back control of representing our motherhood, in our own way (Fig. 17.).

## 2.7 Conclusion

Thus far, the thesis has been focused on the potential interactions between spectators and performers (Chapter One), or watchers and the watched that are involved in the mechanics of performance-to-camera. In Chapter Two, I have discussed the interactions between mothers and daughters within a fine art context as a methodology to develop and sustain feminist representational critique. I have juxtaposed this with the collaboration between Cameron and Silver, *The Swinging Sixties: We Were There* (1992), which critiques the aesthetic binary of women as matter, or simply as material for artworks in a phallogentric culture. My aim has been to examine the effectiveness of performance-to-camera as a strategy for countering prevalent myths about femininity when including the frame, combined with maternal aesthetics as a discursive strategy. The frame symbolises binary thought, as well as internally deconstructing the processes of maintaining the inside and the outside, because the frame always makes us think of what is beyond. For Derrida, the frame simply works too hard to be credible (Derrida, 1987a).

The maternal is not invoked to claim that it is the essential nature of femininity, rather its invocation is to allow the maternal to reverberate around the confined space of traditional aesthetics. For it to challenge the supposedly neutral processes of aesthetic creation, the ideology needs uncovering through the discomfort of inserting the mother within the frame. The maternal realm, as described by Stone (2012), is counter to phallogentric logic and actively resists conventional structures. In the West, there remains a paradoxical relationship with the maternal, where our culture both venerates and performs matricide on the same.

My performances with my daughter are concerned with separation and boundaries, and for Stone this is the contested site for feminine subjectivity. In the maternal realm, which is supposedly dangerous for the infant, should they stay there too long, the mother experiences her past. Through her body-to-body relations with her daughter, she returns in the immediacy of their contact to a pre-Oedipal state (Stone, 2012). Viewed in this way, my performances with my grandmother's wedding gown, and with Matilda, are explorations of this cyclical non-linear time, voyages into

another realm that conflicts with phallogentric ideas about disavowing connections between women and men and their mothers.

In this chapter, I have described my process and reflected on how working in this way refreshes the critical dialogue between women and representation, aesthetics and the camera. Working critically in a way that challenges traditional binary distinctions of women's place within art, situating mothers as makers and subjects, rather than as voiceless objects, the maternal aesthetic presents a radical gesture within fine art process where the inside and the outside of the frame collapse. I have combined this with Derrida's meditations on the nature of the framed space, and our pre-assumptions about what is extrinsic and intrinsic to art.

In the next, and final chapter I will consider maternal aesthetics not only as an artistic practice, but also as a process of care, and as an encounter with the subject. I will consider Šimić's notion of 'givens,' or working with what you have got, as a taboo-breaking depiction of a mother's pragmatism. I will then relate this pragmatism to notions of ethics as contingent upon circumstance.



### Chapter 3: Maternal Space and Acts of Care



Fig. 18. *MSP with Matilda*, Myfanwyn Ryan, (2011-2012).



### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will deploy Jessica Benjamin's intersubjective developmental model<sup>97</sup>, to answer the research question: Can performance-to-camera be a relational process that facilitates subjectivity when maternal aesthetics is invoked? I will argue that this emphasis on inter-subjective process creates a maternal space where performance and art-making can be acts of care. The theme of the maternal follows on from the previous chapter where I argued, following Stone's theorisations on the mother-daughter relationship that an insistence on the infant's separation from the mother is a phallogentric myth that is potentially damaging to the conception of self. The experience of motherhood offers a regression which inevitably challenges this premise. A regression to what Kristeva has described as a pre-semiotic state and pre-oedipal space. The conception of such a space is useful as it provides an alternative to paternalism and its associations, for example, over-identification with the ego, too fixed a sense of individualism, reliance on binary logic, and suppression of the other to sustain itself. Through my performance explorations *My Studio Performances with Matilda* (2011-2012) I have sought to liberate myself from the social and cultural expectations of a final break from my daughter, choosing instead to follow an intersubjective developmental model as theorised by Jessica Benjamin (1990)<sup>98</sup>.

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<sup>97</sup> Benjamin proposes this model (1995) as an alternative approach to the person-object theory or internalisation theories of psychoanalyst thinkers such as Robert Kegan and Bollas. Kegan theorises the mother as a foundational stage in the child's developing subjectivity, an object that one must cast aside for subjectivity to emerge. Kegan illustrates this process with the myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha who, in Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses Book I* (43 B.C. - 17 or 18 A.D), are the only living people on earth after the great flood (Kegan, 1982). The Gods exhort them to "throw the bones of your mother behind you." Kegan argues that, similarly to Deucalion and Pyrrha, 'the infant has survived a flood [and] lives in a world without separate others' (ibid, p.132), and if healthy, he argues, the infant will 'throw the bones of her mother behind her' (ibid). This conjures up an image of the child consuming what it needs of the mother, while dispensing with the remainder. There is no doubt that there are both psychological and philosophical complexities at work when the maternal is invoked. Bollas, a proponent of object relation theory, states that the 'primal maternal object' - in other words, the mother - is experienced by the infant as a transformational object (Bollas, 1991, p. 32). In Bollas's words, this 'object' (the mother) is identified by the baby/infant 'through the processes of transformation of the self', and these transformations are a direct result of 'transformations of the infant's surroundings by the mother' (Bollas, 1991, p. 37), which are aimed at fulfilling the baby's needs.

<sup>98</sup> Jessica Benjamin is a practicing psychoanalyst based in New York, and has developed feminist critique of psychoanalytical theory.

This final chapter explores maternal aesthetics as holding the potential to create a space that breaks from phallocentrism and creates performance as acts of care that diverge from the more duty bound moralistic conceptions, grounded in justice and abstraction that are associated with traditional ethics<sup>99</sup>, instead the care that occurs is of a deeper more ontological form as proposed by Heidegger (1973). In essence then the maternal performance aesthetic that I discuss here is one that seeks new ways to care<sup>100</sup>. This is expressed in my desire to creatively negotiate my separation and proximity and intimacy with my daughter, and it is evident in my interest in Šimić's notion of 'givens'<sup>101</sup>.

I have been exploring and challenging boundaries, aesthetic ones, social norm/ roles assigned to the mother, in order to develop a unique relationship with my daughter that is our own and a unique methodology for my art-making. In a similar way to how Laimbauer describes her process (in Chapter Two), I feel the performance and our relationship, from at least a process perspective, are, at times, one and the same. I think, in essence, this is really what Šimić means when she talks about the performance being useful, this statement can easily be reversed and we could talk about the baby or child being useful, which naturally may provoke questions about ethics. In this context it is not an ethical question, but best understood in a non-binary way as mother-infant roles are very interchangeable and everything, if we abandon the phallocentric myths, is negotiable. The creative processes discussed here all stem from the pressing need to care in its broadest metaphysical (rather than duty/ chore bound) sense. The mother-artist is immersed in her mothering and her art-making and the two things do not detract from each other and are not neatly separable and this does not render her position unethical<sup>102</sup>, it strongly

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<sup>99</sup> Feminist philosophers Sara Ruddick (1990) and Alison Jaggar (1995) have presented arguments that this form of ethics does not relate to those involved in care and empathetic and interdependent relationships.

<sup>100</sup> Where care is not to take over or step in for the other or create dependency, but rather care is ontologically the very nature of our being. I discuss in due course how Heidegger takes apart the Cartesian notion of the mind being separate from the world it inhabits.

<sup>101</sup> I will discuss this in due course in relation to mother-art-making and maternal pragmatism.

<sup>102</sup> On the nature of a mother's power American based contemporary feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick states: 'to a child, a mother is huge – a judge, trainer, audience, and provider who must be placated' (Ruddick, 1989, p. 34). However, Ruddick continues, the mother often feels powerless because 'she is beholden to the workings of "nature" [...] illness, death [...] added to this unavoidable powerlessness is the fact and feeling of social impotence. Many mothers placate the will and serve the needs of a father. [...] Contrary to myth, mothers do not work in private. They are always in public'

communicates the nature and form that mother's lives take and the compromises that are made. Sara Ruddick is clear on the mother's influence on her children, they learn a 'mother-tongue' (Ruddick, 1989, p. 35) and Ruddick argues mothers decide 'what to reveal about their children' (ibid). The paradoxical nature of a mother's power is confusing for children, who tend in Ruddick's view to both love and resent it. However, as mothers we should be honest in admitting that 'power is desirable' (ibid, p. 37), Ruddick argues many mothers deny this desire (ibid). The context I have outlined above is important because I argue that the maternal aesthetic can create a maternal space and this is supported by Ruddick's view that to mother effectively a mother must develop a 'maternal thinking' (ibid, p. 37).

If maternal performance-to-camera is offering something which breaks from the frame and collapses or turns inside out aesthetic process, from a western fine art perspective, then I argue that this occurs because a maternal space is created. This is not a gendered space, but a pre-oedipal one where the other is not repressed or clearly demarcated and interactions are facilitated by the camera. I think it is useful to consider Martin Heidegger's argument about the subject and object relationship that traditionally the ontology of being has been formed around (Heidegger, 1973, p. 228). Heidegger introduces Dasein, literally Being-there (Heidegger, 1973, p. 27) to distinguish from ontological presuppositions on the nature of being and its more traditional Cartesian dichotomy<sup>103</sup> where being has been understood in relation to its separation from the everyday<sup>104</sup> (Heidegger, 1973). Heidegger argues that if we insist that knowledge comes from inside (ibid) then the problem of 'how this knowing subject comes out of its inner "sphere" into one which is "other and external"', arises. He continues, contending that we are assured we should not conceive of this "inside" or inner sphere 'as a sort of box or a cabinet [or frame]' (Heidegger, 1973, p. 87) because when taking this kind of approach 'one remains blind [...to knowing as] a

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(ibid), as they are constantly judged and assessed and treated condescendingly by healthcare professionals, teachers, etc.

<sup>103</sup> That of mind and body being separate, Heidegger favouring instead a conception of full immersion in our surroundings where 'being can be something conceptualised, but it never completely fails to be understood' (Heidegger, 1973, p. 184).

<sup>104</sup> Our being as consciousness, conceptualised here as an immersed form of existence where we are fully present and fascinated, as opposed to being able to retreat, a Being-there (Dasein) 'directs itself towards something and grasps it, it does not somehow first get out of an inner sphere in which it has been proximally encapsulated' (Heidegger, 1973, p. 89).

mode of [...] Being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 1973, p. 88). There is no inside to return to with the 'booty' (ibid, p. 89) we have grasped, we are 'even in perceiving, retaining, and preserving' (ibid) on the outside alongside the object but still inside simultaneously. When our consciousness is conceptualised in this way divisions between inner and outer fall apart and rendered irrelevant.

The forming of *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012) was also an un-forming and the process flowed in two directions, I was unsure where reality and fiction began and ended. We had, Matilda and I entered an ill-defined zone where dark things can occur, my frustrations and ambivalence as well as hers and our love were all revealed. This love may become excessive and spill over into the realms of taboo breaking or uncomfortably controlling, the child may or may not be a willing participant and if unaware the child will not have been able to actively consent. The mother may be conflicted, caught between the seeming necessity of duty and responsibility and her own desires. Love and closeness may come naturally and with ease or alternatively can feel like a struggle, the mother is romanticised, worshipped but also demonised and extinguished in our culture (Alison Stone, 2012. Ruddick, 1989).

### 3:2 Experiments with Leaving and Returning

In contrast to the dominant object-relation model contemporary feminist psychoanalyst Benjamin (1995) uses an intersubjective model, arguing that mothering is a process of mutual recognition (Benjamin, 1995) and this has the effect of granting agency to both mother and child. I align my style of mothering and my maternal aesthetic (I do not think it is possible to keep the two mutually exclusive) more closely with this theory. I, like Benjamin, am critical of object relations theory, where 'the formation of the self is tied to separation' (Virginia Held, 1995, p. 41), and sets up an opposition to 'the experience of self to the experience of connection with others' (ibid). Not only does the conception of separation oppose individuals to each other, but as Benjamin argues, it also sees the child's interactions as part of this process and 'leaves in the unexamined background the aspects of engagement, connection, and active assertion that occur with the mother as other' (Benjamin, 1995, p. 31). Benjamin contends that the mother-object conception is 'infantocentric' (ibid), and misses the pleasure of the evolving relationship with an 'other'. This is the evolution I explore in the work made with my daughter *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012).

Intersubjective theory differs from separation-individuation theories, because it is not concerned with how much we can, or do, take from the other (Benjamin, 1990) to be able to go away. Rather, intersubjective theory is based on the notion that 'the other plays an active part in the struggle of the individual to creatively discover and [crucially] accept reality' (Benjamin, 1990, p. 45). In short, I would contend that an analysis of the relationship between mother and child, if accurate, must reflect the inherent instability of power relations between the two. Benjamin proposes that the theoretical lacuna that surrounds the mother as subject 'profoundly impedes on our ability to perceive the world as comprised of equal subjects' (ibid). I would continue this analysis by arguing that because of the interchangeable nature of the mother-child subject position, choice and agency are less distinct as a result of this process of 'mutual recognition' (Benjamin, 1990, p. 16, 1992, pp. 45-46). As Benjamin asserts, the very moment of self-awareness, in the form of recognising other minds and understanding that we can share feelings is also when we learn that our child can (and will) disagree with us (Benjamin, 1995, p. 35), and we can disagree with

our child. This mutual recognition between a mother and child should be central to our conception of subjectivity, because if this process does not occur then the subject is left with a warped sense of their relationship with the other and the world. The inter-subjective model proposes that the interactions between a parent and a child promote recognition coupled with the desire to be recognised (Benjamin, 1992, p. 46). The framework of the intersubjective model can help us achieve this mutual recognition. Benjamin, like Stone, is critical of the type of separation-individuation theory where the maternal being is an object of transformation for the child (Bollas, 1991). I contend that it is difficult to avoid objectification and objectifying entirely when mothering, however, it is the conflict between being an object of desire and achieving independent subject-hood which, to a large extent, defines early motherhood. Interestingly the subjective struggle for mothers mirrors feminist debates about representation and subjectivity and this is this process I interrogate in *MSP with Matilda* (2011 – 2012). Where the need to entertain her is prevalent, it is this need that is the initial reason for our game of hide-and-seek and our subsequent disruptions of the space. I do not see my role as incidental to her development. I am not passive, she does not consume me. I play with my daughter because we are becoming better acquainted through our interactions. During the course of this play we are able to establish subjectivities that transcend the limitations of a statically conceived symbolic mother that exists at the disposal of the infant. However, my daughter's role in this should not be side-lined, through taking an inter-subjective approach I accept the nature of the performance as collaboration. I do not direct her, I do not tell her what to do, I have no particular aim (at the point of executing the performance) just some ideas I want to explore.

The mother's leaving, dramatised in *MSP with Matilda* (2011-12) when I disappear in the drapes, becomes a focal point in the child's conception of separate minds and others independent aims (Benjamin, 1995). However, in my game the mother leaves and returns. In developmental terms, Benjamin explains how:

[...] beginning when the child is about fourteen months of age, a conflict emerges between her grandiose aspirations and the perceived reality of her limitations and dependency. Although she is now able to do more, the toddler is aware of what she can't do and what she can't make mother do – for example stay with her (Benjamin, 1995, p. 37).

A large part of why Matilda was with me, on the day I had arranged to hire the photography studio, was her continued need and desire to be close to me, and likewise my need and desire to be close to her, physically manifested in the symbolic and actual form of breastmilk. Our subjectivity was fluid and flowed between us; the milk both represented and exemplified this connection. To suggest that it was simply a case of the artist handling the child as material in a manner akin to Yves Klein's models, would be to disavow the intensity of emotion between the subjects who are at times distinct and at times still joined together. In *MSP with Matilda* (2010-2011), where the viewer perceives a game being played, the game is more complex than the superficial meaning of a mother's coercion. Indeed, the game is a negotiation of boundaries and presence and absence. Therefore, the nuances of a new relationship between a mother and her child, when perceived as developmentally inter-subjective, begin to be dynamic and process based. In short, through the performance and the photographic space, we begin to emerge as subjects and this emergence is profound, and it extends beyond the literal moment of being photographed because, it insists on a recognition that exceeds the limitations of conceptions of normative gender roles and established maternal representations. Through *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012) I sought to problematise the standard perception of mothering and femininity where the mother is a martyr who, according to Kegan's theory (1982), is to be discarded. The mother emerges in my work, not only as a developmental facilitator, but as a subject negotiating her own subjectivity.

Grace Surman in her video performance with her daughter, *I Love My Baby and My Baby Loves...* (2010) experiments with both the physical and the emotional distance she puts between herself and her baby. Halfway through the performance, Surman hides behind the kitchen counter while her baby encounters and then orally explores a pile of flour left out for her by Surman. Initially, I found this image amusing, but it then began to disturb me, verging on the distressing, as the baby retched and gagged on the flour. I was aware of the proximity of Surman, and I was aware that the baby was unsure of the presence of her mother. In another part of the performance-to-camera, Surman lies on the floor lifelessly while her baby crawls on her and pulls at her face. Surman is aware of the potency of what is occurring and

allows it to play out for an uncomfortably long period of time. There is no sense of the mother helping her baby, and even though Surman is present, the baby seems abandoned. This challenges and upturns the spectator's notion of the nature of care, and begs the question of responsibility and the role of the artist-mother<sup>105</sup>.

As I continue to watch Surman's performance-to-camera an alternative narrative begins to emerge, one in which I see the mother as enabling the baby to explore and experiment in a relatively unmediated and un-directed manner. We are presented with a different notion of care, a different maternal subjectivity based on allowing the child to experience risk and the sensation of loneliness without assuaging those fears. What makes this compelling, if uncomfortable viewing, is how far it is taken, coupled with the questions of when or indeed if it constitutes neglect? The underlying air of ambivalence in the work and Surman's maternal subjectivity is the question of how far she will go for her work and how much she is prepared to sacrifice the immediate needs of her baby.

In the early 1970s, Cameron was engaged in similar meditations on her subjectivity in the light of becoming a mother. Her performance, *Rabbits*, whilst pregnant with twins in 1974, was a means to negotiate both the sexualised representation of women through the stereotype of the bunny girl, and the maternal stereotype of having been reduced to a 'breeding machine' through the inference of rabbits being good at breeding or being rapid breeders.

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<sup>105</sup> There are many precedents for moral outrage at the seemingly callous, neglectful, unethical and controlling actions of mother-artists. American photographer Sally Mann photographed her children nude whilst remaining resolutely dressed and behind the camera. In the article *The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann*, *New York Post* (1992), which purported to be a review of her exhibition *Immediate Family*, Richard Woodward proceeds to describe what sort of 'mom' she is, favouring, we are told, 'a subdued a-sexual preppy look' (Woodward, 1992) in her dress sense. Mann sent her two oldest children to psychologist Daniel Shybunko, to ascertain whether they had been emotionally damaged or abused by her photographing them, he concluded that they were 'well-adjusted and self-assured' (ibid). At an exhibition of her work at the Milwaukee Art Museum, in 1991, the Rev. Vic Eliason demanded the police and D.A. come and investigate the show under indecency laws (ibid). In London, during an exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in 2001, police threatened to seize two of photographer Tierney Gearon's portraits of her children under British indecency laws. Interestingly, in her defence, Gearon claimed that her photographs were far less sexualised than Mann's (Gearon, 2001). Gearon also made the rather pertinent point that photographer, Richard Billingham, has taken images of his family that are far more revealing, but they do not attract the same moral outrage.





Fig. 19. *Rabbits*, Shirley Cameron, (1974).

In this performance, a heavily pregnant Cameron had a stove on which to cook and other domestic trappings, and was dressed somewhere between a mother rabbit and a bunny girl (Fig. 19.). Cameron continued to tour this performance, accompanied by her husband and their twin babies. The performance consisted of Cameron caring for the bunnies, and reading *Peter Rabbit* stories in an attempt to civilise them and teach them how to be good little bunnies. Cameron described the performance to me as 'part funny, but also sinister as I was a pregnant woman in a cage' (Cameron, 2016). The performance lasted all day and after the twins were born they were cared for elsewhere by Cameron's mother-in-law. At this point the twins had not been fully integrated into Cameron's work, however, being separated from them when they were a few weeks old in order to perform can still be constituted as an act of pragmatism that pained her to some degree.

In another performance Cameron performed *Washing the Twins* (1977) with daughters Lois and Colette, and her friend the feminist novelist, Angela Carter. The

performance site was in front of a bronze statue of twins in a park in Portugal. Carter washed the bronze twins while Cameron washed her twin daughters. Of course, this functions very differently as performance-to-camera than it would have done as live art; it speaks to me of the politics of ethics and vulnerability, because the women represented are seemingly confined in this role of care even whilst they attempt to create something aesthetic. Cameron's subsequent collaborations with her daughters were a direct consequence of her needs as an artist and her desire to lead an unconventional lifestyle as a mother, coupled with the seeming impossibility of merging these concerns.



Fig. 20. *Washing the Twins*, Shirley Cameron, Angela Carter, Colette and Lois Cameron, (1977).

When I spoke to Cameron about this performance she explained that: 'once we had washed them, she (Carter) dressed the sculptures and I dressed the twins. It did cause a little rumpus with the nearby art gallery who thought it was a bit disrespectful of their sculptures – which it was' (Cameron, 2016). As a viewer of these images, and as a mother of young daughters, the level of exposure to which the twins are subject here is challenging; the portrayal of intimate detail is not merely portrayal because they are nude, and they are being washed publicly. It is interesting that, compared to Mann's or Gearon's work in the 1990s and early 2000s, the controversy recalled by Cameron is centred on her and Carter's treatment of the sculpture, rather than their treatment of the twins, thus exposing perceptions of value and worth and

what is perceived to be in need of care, and furthermore, how such care should be administered and how this perception has changed over time. I suggested to Cameron that today the controversy would be more likely to centre on the mother's treatment of her children, because of the public enactment of what is ostensibly a private moment and because of the questions the work begs with regard to the mother's relationship to her children. The challenge presented by this type of practice to a more detached conception of aesthetic process, where objects are moulded or placed, is key to understanding the radical nature of maternal aesthetics. Maternal practice is often realised from total immersion in the moment and through the relational. A strong sense of immediacy resonates in this work, where the twins and Carter collaborate in Cameron's pressing need to produce art, however momentary. I argue that this work of Cameron's is a fine example of the feminist concern to elevate or aestheticise the act of care.



Fig. 21. *Washing the Twins*, Shirley Cameron, Colette and Lois Cameron, (1977).

It is worth stressing that when I questioned Cameron on the ethical nature of washing the twins and performing this intimate moment publicly (Fig. 20. and Fig. 21.), she was rather nonplussed. My understanding was that ethics had not been her

concern<sup>106</sup> and that what is being addressed is that encounter of aesthetics with the everyday in a context that, arguably, suffers from moral exclusion. By this I mean that, in her desperation to be creatively productive, a mother may feel like she has prior claim both to her child's expressive nature and, literally, to their body. For Cameron, this performance was very much concerned with the tension between high art and aesthetic process, and the everyday nature that caring for her twins was often perceived as whilst also maintaining a presence as an artist. The maternal aesthetic challenges the very notion of what form care and responsibility take on the part of the mother because it presents situations that reveal the pragmatic and ambivalent sides to care as well as reminding us of its deeper metaphysical dimensions. The role of the artist mother, presents a new paradigm of care between mother and child that is grounded in process and interaction and ontology<sup>107</sup> expressed in the development of subjectivity and the physicality of the relationship.

I have been discussing Surman and Cameron's work as practises that embody risk, ambivalence, emotional distance or pragmatism, and aesthetics. These artists push against the expectation that a mother must care in a certain way, and what constitutes that care, and how expectations, myths and everyday realities influence an artist's process. For Cameron<sup>108</sup> the performances were devised as responses to the dual concerns of the situation in which they found themselves, namely what was available *in situ* and the need to care for the babies, and in this way the maternal performance is both useful and honest.

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<sup>106</sup> This draws parallels with Hirsch's argument with regard to Mann's work discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>107</sup> For Heidegger care is the ontological basis of our existence, he argues that 'care emerges in connection with the familiar way of taking a man as compounded of body (earth) and spirit [...] in care this entity has the "source" of its Being [...] the entity is not released from this source but is held fast, dominated by it through and through as long as this entity "is in the world" (Heidegger, 1973, p. 243). In short, care holds us fast to our bodies which are the basis of our existence in the world.

<sup>108</sup> See Appendix Oral history recording with Shirley Cameron.

### 3:3 'Givens'<sup>109</sup>

In this section I examine this concept of 'givens' and discuss the work of Cameron and Šimić who both merge their motherly duties with their artistic duties. This is a prevalent theme for those who work in maternal aesthetics, and has prompted Hirsch to declare that 'the social pressures placed on mothers who want to be artists is exposed in such practices' (Hirsch, 1997, p. 154). However, the concept of 'givens' is problematical in that, on the surface, it appears to propose a certain degree of dispassionate and strategic thinking about one's child. Traditional male-centric ethics would uphold the moralistic and the universal perspective that, as mothers, we are culturally primed to maintain the narrative of care which places the child's needs first (Jaggar, 1992). Should a mother who is an artist, include her child in the frame? I maintain, based on what I have learnt and experienced through performing with my daughter, that what is at stake in mother art-making and maternal aesthetics is the enmeshing of subjectivity and practice, where maternal processes and aesthetics are not separate from the actuality of mothering, and where something more profound occurs than simply representation. My subjective and immersed position in the material and subject matter of mothering presents me with not only a different aesthetic approach, but also with a non-Cartesian way of being, and it also presents me, as an artist who is also a mother who collaborates with her children, with different moral obligations. However, my role as mother does not grant me exclusive rights to treat and depict my children as I see fit, or as props in my representations. *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012) dramatises both the 'basic tension between denial and affirmation of the other' (Benjamin, 1995, p. 39) and they offer a solution in the form of the potential to establish a shared reality (ibid). For the reasons stated above, to perform with one's daughter cannot simply be dismissed as exploitative (although it may be), since the sense of pragmatism and ambivalence that often inspires work of this nature is due, in part, to the continued underlying skewed picture presented in certain theoretical models, such as Kegan's, where the mother is passive, or the child is passive.

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<sup>109</sup> This was something discussed at a LADA *Study Room in Exile* event in 2016, which was hosted by Šimić and Emily Underwood-Lee at *The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home*. Subsequently, there has been a live art and the maternal archive created, which is held at the Live Art Development Agency. My performance-to-camera *MNWG* (2010) is now held as part of this collection.





Fig. 22. Lena Šimić, *Sid Jonah Anderson*. (2008).

Jaggar proposes a feminist ethics of care, where the basis of ethical decision making is placed more in 'relationships, responsibilities, particularity, and partiality' (Jaggar, 1992, pp. 363-364). The significance here is that the aesthetics proposed by her work are entirely relational, and the spectator is tasked with involvement, even if simply on an emotional level, and there is no attempt to distinguish clearly between art and life because the process is grounded in specific relationships and daily responsibilities.

Writing on Šimić, Imogen Tyler explains the process thus:

[...] *Sid Jonah Anderson* by Lena Šimić was staged in March 2008 as a part of MAP Live event at Source Café in Carlisle. It was composed of a live art performance in which Šimić went through Sid's bedtime routine. As Šimić notes: The live action on stage consisted of performing the daily routine with Sid: bathing, dressing, feeding, laying down to sleep. This very banal everyday action was heightened through its staging. My movements on stage were quite sharp, neat and timed. Props were arranged and the performance

space was highly organized. Additionally, the action was complemented by audio-visual footage: extracts from my diary and photographs from my walks in the park (Tyler, n.d.).

Recently, whilst hosting the *Motherhood and Live Art* (2016) event, Šimić described this performance as ‘useful’, because Sid needed putting to bed, so why not include it in the performance? In this work and the accompanying piece, together titled *Maternal Matters* (2007-2008), Sid features in live performance or performance-to-camera with his mother so that she can continue to ‘get on with her life as an artist and a mother’ (ibid). It is easy to be moralistic about the pragmatism in her attitude and the apparent placement of her baby as a ‘prop’ in her work. However, I would argue that it is not the mother’s intention to objectify her child, because women, like myself and Šimić, are concerned to represent what Hirsch terms the ‘interconnected plots of mothers and children’ (Hirsch, 1997, pp. 175-176). Šimić’s performance has parallels with the work of Polish duo KwieKulik (1972-1974) who created a series of ‘actions with their baby son’ (Angela Harutyunyan *et al*, 2012, pp. 225-226). Harutyunyan *et al* (2012) further connect these activities with a reaction to the wider loss of privacy in Eastern Europe at the time (ibid). KwieKulik created over 900 images, titled *Activities with Dobromierz* (1972-1974), where their baby was surrounded with different objects, one of which featured knives and forks, while another included blocks of ice<sup>110</sup>. Over time Šimić’s maternal practice has evolved and has been responsive to the different ages of her children and their differing needs and desires, in addition to her own.

In my own initial performances-to-camera made with my daughter, where attempts were made to de-fuse the camera’s authority as a witness by working with it in performance as something that can be ignored, or can simply be utilised as an instrument to depict time spent together, or as something excessively present. My aim was to disappear from the camera’s view to question its authority as a signifier and a tool enabling visibility. This is critically the case in Cameron’s 1977 performance *A Cage, Enmeshed* (1974)<sup>111</sup>, and *Washing the Twins* (1977), all

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<sup>110</sup> Twin Gabriel, is another example of an Eastern European family performance ensemble.

<sup>111</sup> The cage motif appears in other performances of the time and continues in work to the present day, Elia Arce performed an installation which involved her hunched figure inside a birdcage, attached with a label that read “feed me” In, *I have so Many Stitches that Sometime I Dream that I’m Sick* (1993). Meiling Cheng described this as feminist excess (Cheng, 2002, p. 137). Bonnie Ora Sherk also performed *Public Lunch* (1971) in which she was in a cage next door to a caged tiger. It is clear

performed with her twin daughters. Here, the camera attempts to be factual and is an aside to the main drama, which occurs in the here-and-now, and in the present. It is remarkable to reflect on the absence of digital devices and cameras, and how the spectators who crowd around the cage containing Cameron and her daughters are doing just that - spectating without recording. The camera's role is strange, being somehow out of place and not of central importance. What is pertinent to me, enabling me to contextualise my own maternal explorations through the historic example of Cameron's practice, is her negotiation of ethical boundaries and also her communication of a sense of entrapment or confinement in her role as mother. In my performance-to-camera aesthetics, the frame and maternal expectation are all boundaries to transgress. Over time I have come to realise that these experiments with my daughter, in front of the camera, were more than simply resistance to phallogentric representation, because the camera granted a relational space in which we could develop our subjectivities. Alison Stone argues that the model of 'potential space' (Stone, 2012, p. 68) can help us develop the idea of a mother who is not 'mere background to her child's speech and imaginings' (ibid). Stone is proposing a mother who 'co-speaks and co-imagines' (ibid, p. 68) with her child, where the potential space is an opening that enables 'two where one had been' (ibid). In this case I argue that the camera allows that to happen and is the facilitator that enables a relational space to occur, thereby maternal performance does hold the potential to overturn myths about the mother and overturn or up-end the mutual powerlessness experienced by mother and child.

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that all these works are making ironic observations about the animal or 'natural' emphasis placed on the feminine as well as fetishism of women.



### 3:4 Acts of Care

In the practices I have discussed it is not simply the emotional and practical basis in which mothering occurs and what our subjectivity means when we become mothers and how this furthers debates on the terms through which we are visible, with which I am concerned. I am also interrogating the perception of care and its gendered character in our culture, as well as its superficial associations with dependence, submission or weakness.

From the late 1960s through to the 1980s, feminist artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles created her *Maintenance Art Works* (1969-1980), and her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (1969). In the manifesto, Ukeles declares that she will no longer separate art from her other roles - as mother, as wife - nor from her chores. In her maintenance art proposal for an exhibition titled 'Care', Ukeles explained how she would:

Simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art. I will live in the museum and [do what] I customarily do at home with my husband and my baby, for the duration of the exhibition. [...] MY WORKING WILL BE THE WORK' (Ukeles, 1969).

Ukeles attempts to elevate the importance of tasks often consigned to the menial or described as women's work through aestheticizing and also politicising them appropriating the form of the manifesto, used by artists and activists alike, in order to do so. In this way she stakes a claim for her process being inseparable to her daily routines and the physical experience of her existence, as well as her social context. Exposing the hidden work of women through such representations, and raising the importance of care as a meaningful and aesthetically beautiful activity, has been an important driving force behind women's performance with their children, of which Mary Kelly's practice is another pertinent example. Andrea Liss argues that Kelly's 'labour-and-time-intensive project meticulously establishes that the mother is anything but passive in the infant and young child's development' (Liss, 2011, p. 77) an argument that resonates with Benjamin's claims as well as my own on the potential the maternal space created through artistic interventions and inventiveness holds for mothers and children alike.

I am expanding this conception of care beyond the nature of it being unpaid and often designated as women's work, and the feminist project to elevate its status in our culture. Taking Heidegger's theorising on the nature of 'taking care' as constitutive of, in ontological terms, being-there (Heidegger, 1973, pp. 235-244), it is clear that the turn towards the maternal as an aesthetic is not solely focused on raising concerns with regard to who performs acts of care; it is also a means of configuring subjectivity beyond passivity. Although care, if confined to the feminine, becomes oppressive, it is inherently a means of encountering the world which holds incredible meaning, philosophically, for how subjectivity is developed and maintained. This is evidenced in Heidegger's writing where care is carefulness and devotedness (ibid, p. 243) and care is intrinsically linked to our apprehension of the other, evident in the phrases "to care about" or "care for" and in the act of solicitude<sup>112</sup>.

For Benjamin, theorising from the Hegelian master-slave dialectic (Georg Hegel, 1979), the term mutual recognition provides a model of interaction that is not based on domination and requires acceptance of the nature of our dependency on others and 'domination begins with the attempt to deny' (Benjamin, 1990, p. 52) this dependency. Benjamin argues that the balance of self (ibid, p. 53) in Hegel's theory of recognition is reliant on the self to have 'the opportunity to act and have an effect on the other' (ibid). The self, to exist for itself must also exist for another, and 'there is no way out of this dependency' (ibid) therefore we must care for each other to maintain independent existences. Benjamin continues 'if the other denies me recognition, my acts have no meaning, I can only submit', and it is when this happens that domination occurs and our 'desire and agency can find no outlet, except in the form of obedience' (ibid). Therefore, true independence is the balance of asserting oneself whilst recognising the other, something which, Benjamin argues, both Freud and Hegel seem to equate dependency as being the same as surrender (Benjamin, 1990) and this is where the urge for mastery over the other springs from. In this instance Benjamin's insistence on mutual recognition within the mother-child

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<sup>112</sup> Heidegger argues that there are two distinct forms of solicitude, there is the first type which is disempowering for the Other and takes over and dominates them, and the other form does not so much 'leap in for the Other as *leap ahead* of him [...] not in order to take away his 'care' but rather to give it back to him authentically' (Heidegger, 1973, pp. 158-159)

relationship requires Heidegger's separation of the two forms of solicitude (see footnote 16). I am discussing the possibility to appreciate the other, in this case my daughter, as a being in her own right (ibid). To do this, I have been at pains to dismantle the stereotypical mother who belongs to the child and who is an extension of the child's will, and the stereotypical mother who is all-powerful (ibid). I have used the theoretical tools provided by Alison Stone and Jessica Benjamin to challenge this conception, they both argue for more autonomy and fluidity in the mother-child relationship (Stone, 2012. Benjamin, 1990) and I have extended my analysis to incorporate Heidegger's theory of being-there as grounded in care which holds us to our bodies (Heidegger, 1973) because there is no inner Cartesian sphere which we can escape to.

The idea that the mother has sacrificed herself has a profound effect on her daughter, for whom the mother 'is not only an object of love but a mainstay of identity' (Benjamin, 1990, p. 79), and for Benjamin the association of masochism and femininity stems from this identification. Benjamin argues that 'femininity and motherhood have been tainted with submission, self-abnegation, and helplessness' (ibid, p. 80). The sense of abnegation and helplessness that I felt on becoming a mother stems from the perception of mothering that is grounded in object relations theory, because it not only denies the mother's subjectivity it also problematises girls' continued connections with their mothers (Held, 1995, p. 41) and 'sustains a series of oppositions that have been central in Western thought and moral theory' (ibid). Carol Gilligan<sup>113</sup> argues that these antagonisms are 'the opposition between thought and feelings, self and relationship, reason and compassion, justice and love. Object relations theory also continues the conventional division of psychological labour between women and men' (ibid).

In fact, care is the act of mutual recognition between others which grants agency to each subject involved in the exchange. It is through the act of care and its reciprocal nature that we learn intersubjective processes, such as how 'to move and affect one another' (Held, 1995, p. 40). Feminist ethicist, Gilligan argues that there has been a

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<sup>113</sup> A contemporary feminist philosopher on ethics.

tendency, in philosophy, psychoanalytic theory and psychology to 'associate care with self-sacrifice' (ibid, p. 41), a view which is at odds with the currently held belief that 'care' is a 'coherent moral perspective' (ibid) that can be applied to establish or retain a sense of justice. Care, as a moral framework operating independently outside of a justice framework, is based in the intersubjective where the 'self is responsive and, therefore as arising in relationship' (ibid, p. 36), and this is very different morally to the conception that all actions emanate from the self. This is also very different to how the notion of care operates within 'a justice construction' (ibid) where 'care becomes the mercy that tempers justice' (ibid), or shows forgiveness, or is less exacting. To summarise then, care is, in a Heideggerian sense, a being-with the Other and is a manifestation of being-there which constitutes the essence of our existence because care ties us to the physical world through our bodies and their actions and experiences (Heidegger, 1973, pp. 242-243). The maternal space I describe in the section below manifests out of the commitment to mutual recognition (Benjamin, 1990) accomplished through acts of care, in conjunction with the broader and deeper meanings of this term such as devotedness and attentiveness (Heidegger, 1973) and then relating these acts of care back to Ruddick's maternal thinking (1989) in order to create a maternal aesthetic that is defined as a new space that is not framed in a traditional aesthetic sense as truly separate to the everyday normative conceptions of the mothers role and subjectivity.

### 3:5 The Maternal Gaze

Both performance and the maternal share ground and inter-relatedness in their reliance on presence, care in its metaphysical sense, as discussed above, and their associations with lack and an element of excess. Similar to Mann, Šimić and Cameron, I have used the proximal to the point of invasion, and been obsessive in the quantity of images I have produced. For example, my studio performances each comprise 365 images, making a total of approximately one thousand images of myself with my daughter during this period of time. Equally, representing this process could be viewed as overly sentimental to the point of transgression, as is the case for artist Eti Wade in her performance-to-camera *Kisses* (2001), where she repeatedly kisses her son's naked torso. In all instances of mother-art-making there is the potential to perceive or understand that ambivalence, invasion, excess, even lack, as part of the act of mothering and, likewise, as part of performance. Even putting to one side the ethical implications of including one's children, there are often difficult choices to make when leaving an infant for work. In Tracey Kershaw's work, *What I Found in My Son's Pockets* (2016), she displays a collection of the items saved from her son's pockets over a ten-year period. In Kershaw's maternal aesthetics, hoarding encapsulates her sense of sadness at the impending and inevitable separation from her son<sup>114</sup>. However, this piece (which Kershaw discusses in the oral history recordings in the Appendix), although inextricably tied up with her deep feelings for her son, communicates an image of a controlling mother prying into her child's inner world, albeit that this is a somewhat superficial reading.

My daughter's presence in my performances during this time, *MSP Matilda* (2011-12), which I have been arguing was in her capacity as an extension of the mother's subjectivity in the first instance, and then in our subsequent negotiations of separation and establishment of identity, may do little to reassure those concerned for the child's lack of agency. The ethical dimension of my process is derived from our relationship to each other and the restrictions placed on me as practically sole carer to an infant, as a subject who did not want to give in to the impulse to self-

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<sup>114</sup> As part of *The Mother as Artist, The Artist as Mother*. Curators Tracey Kershaw and Sam Rose, Lace Market Gallery, Nottingham (2016).

abnegate and choose instead to retain an independent set of ideas and desires, and to represent these needs through performance-to-camera. Most importantly, this process was joyous and restorative; it made my relationship with my daughter stronger. I would argue that lack, or loss of agency through submission, does not occur when we are engaged in games that seek the other. Mother and child must together emerge from the subterranean space where normative modes of subjectivity ceased or were, at least, suspended for a time.

In defence of Mann's practice, Hirsch argues that it is not simply intention that alters our understanding of the complexities of the ethical questions posed by the work. There is also the matter of context (Hirsch, 1997), and this type of work changes the ethical position because the artist has a clear feminist agenda, and has set boundaries for herself, and has spoken to her children about what is permissible and what is not. The first point about context is entering into the territory of what is called virtue ethics, as theorised by Plato (Rosalind Hursthouse, 2016), which is not how I would personally choose to justify my practice. However, the second point, which concerns Mann's verbal arrangements with her children on what images she can create, is clearly an ethical standpoint where consent is not assumed but active. Mann describes the process thus:

All three children exercised veto power over certain images: Virginia didn't want people to see her urinating; Emmett objected to a pose in which he had socks on his hands. "You know what they're really worried about?" asks Mann incredulously. "They don't want to look like dorks. They don't want to be geeks or dweebs. Nudity doesn't bother them." (Woodward, 1992).

Nevertheless, the notion of the children's adaptation to their mother's artistic process and how that infiltrates into their upbringing and outlook is extremely interesting in the context of the maternal aesthetics in which I have situated my own practice. I am not sure that the children's role in the work is solely an issue concerned with ethics, since I would argue that it is a feminist issue, because the mother is making art which gives (or should give) immense value to the process she is undertaking with her children. This is problematic when faced with a very narrowly defined conception of the caring role and the moral dimension of this role. Joan C. Tronto, a professor of political science, argues that the moral judgements we make about a mother centres

on her failure to 'meet her duty of care' (Tronto, 1989, p. 104). She also argues that these type of judgements are deeply rooted in 'social, classist, and cultural assumptions about mothers' duties' (ibid). Crucial to Tronto's argument about this 'duty' is that the role has been assigned from outside and, therefore, moral judgements that have been made about children's roles in their mother's art practice, for example in the cases of Mann and Gearon, can be read as a reflex to capitulate back to the normative standard of caregiving, making this methodology a radical act. A woman taking control of her own representation, and by extension enabling her child to do the same, and weaving that process into her duty of care, upsets not only regulated versions of feminine subjectivity but also the normative care duties (some essential, as will be illustrated below, and some culturally programmed) that have been pre-assigned for the mother to perform.

My artistic decisions and my treatment of Matilda stem from the necessity of moving beyond the functionality of nurture and hygiene, because I am, after all, a creature with complex needs and desires above the base instincts, and I am eager to impart this to my daughter. I continue to be attentive to her and the particularities of me caring for her, which centre on my knowledge of her and the life we lead together. On the occasion of the first *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012), I had arranged studio time for the cameraman (Alan Duncan) to assist me in what I had conceived of as an exploration of the frame as a phenomenological performance. I intended to perform on the boundaries of the image as an intervention on the underlying ideological nature of the aesthetic frame as a separation between inside and outside. However, on the morning in question, when I arrived at the photography studio, Matilda would not settle and fall asleep in her pushchair as I had hoped, and my attempts to entertain her and simultaneously undertake my performance inevitably merged and intertwined and resulted in her inclusion. My attention was repeatedly pulled back towards her as she was determined to pursue danger in the form of electricity cables. My playing with her was intended to keep her happy and out of harm's way while I made some art. To discuss this in terms of is theoretically stilted and in this context irrelevant. When I use the term natural, in reference to the inclusion of Matilda within this thesis and my practice, it simply felt right instinctively as her need was to be with me. The work, therefore, is pragmatic; a combination of necessity,

care as devotedness and attentiveness and also an element of duty or responsibility, and the place where my own desires and wishes as an artist intersect with my role as a mother and my daughter's own role and wishes. This process, particularly as a first-time mother, was often the site of mental conflict and guilt on my part, such as berating myself for being excessive or thinking that Matilda is perhaps too attached to me. However, as can be witnessed in the images taken, the consequent juggling and compromising, as well as the internal struggles with duty as an imposed external framework and the instinctive acts of care that I now realise were inter-subjective, the maternal aesthetic is at work. This was a space where care became creative and playful, and thereby, freedom, the involvement and representation of love and pleasure, as well as desperation, lack of control and exploitation, were all allowed some time and exploration.

The process I describe above, although aesthetic, stems from the wider process of mothering and its practice, described by feminist philosopher Ruddick in the 1980s as 'maternal thinking' (1989), namely the development of critical self-appraisal that we undertake when reflecting on our interactions with our children (Ruddick, 1990). In this work, I am representing and questioning what sort of mother I am, rather than seeking to expose Matilda. My daughter's self-awareness increased as we progressed through the sequences of performance-to-camera between her first and second birthdays, and this was both challenging to the process, because that sense of blissful unawareness was so beautiful in the initial sequence, and it also prompted reflection on the nature of consent. The only way to ascertain if this work is psychologically damaging for children, or renders them powerless, was through the first-hand research with other mother-artists, undertaken as part of this thesis. The aim was to examine their intentions and also the processes whereby they involved their children. Having worked directly in performance with children and having encountered the practices and met with other mother artists<sup>115</sup>, I am able to assert

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<sup>115</sup> *Perambulator*, Clare Qualmann (2014); *And She Watched*, DeeJ Fabyc (2003); *Maintain, manu tenere: hold in the hand*, Emily Orley and Katja Hilevaara (2015); *Patience*, Emily Underwood-Lee (2009/2010); *Breastcups*, Eve Dent and Zoë Gingell (2011), *I Love My Baby and My Baby Loves ...*, Grace Surman (2010); *Things Stack Up*, Grace Surman (2015); *Mother Stories*, Helen Sargeant (2015), *Your Grandmother's Middle Name was Rose*, Jennifer Verson (2014); *Medea/Mothers' Clothes*, Lena Šimić (2004); *Contemplation Time* (including *Sid Jonah Anderson* by Lena Šimić live art event), Lena Šimić (2007/2008); *Maternity Leaves*, Lizzie Philps (2013); *The Pilgrimage of the Prodigal Daughter*, Lizzie Philps (2014); *31 Days Old*, Sarah Black, Jane and Lynne



that a major part of mother–child performance is the re-establishment of boundaries and, crucially, the negotiation of separation. The nature of how power and control play out within these aesthetic interactions sheds light on the taboo nature of our mothers’ invasions and colonisations of our own bodies when we were infants or children. The perspective I offer is an articulation of both sides of this interplay between subjects. This includes the memory of a mother’s excesses, the absences and the disappearances, in addition to the awful wrench experienced when the infant is left, or leaves, perhaps by crawling away. In the midst of this my position is that I still maintain the right and the desire to represent and negotiate my subjectivity.



Fig. 23. *MSP with Matilda*, Myfanwyn Ryan, (2011-2012).

*MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012) (Fig. 23.) was an improvised performance that emerged from the necessity of care and the role of attentiveness in this process, and our mutual desire to be together, coupled with my personal desire to make some art.

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(2016); *20 Minutes*, Tracy Evans (2012), *Caesura*, Tracy Evans (2013), *Rehearsal for a Birth Story*, Tracy Evans (2015); *Cradle*, Zoë Gingell (2012).

We disappear behind the drapes, sometimes together, and sometimes apart (Fig. 23.). Matilda is alone, I am alone, and then we listen out for each other and watch the movements of the drapes. In these images, the drapes are the backdrop to our drama of separation, and they represent the outer limits of the frame, the void, a black-spot. The suggestion of a reverse side to the image, symbolised by our going behind the drapes, conjures up Irigaray's concave mirror and this forms a literal and figurative backdrop to the images we are creating together. I use the term 'together' because we are engaged in this performance *together*, in a process of intersubjective becoming. The process of separation, although negotiated here playfully, may present the mother with conflict especially where the child's demands can become threatening to her sense of autonomy. In *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012), the child will not be, or is no longer, the mother's object (Benjamin, 1995). This tension between 'asserting one's own reality and accepting the others' (ibid, p. 38) is deeply felt in these performances. I was frequently not in control of what happened to me, often in thrall to my child, or at a loss as to what to do with her and her irrepressible energy and desires and this is mirrored in the performances that I was also not fully in control of.

This ambiguity between self and other is what shifts the power balance in my performances with Matilda, and thereby it presents an explanation of the ethical nature of the process. In essence, the play that occurs in the photography studio is a series of transitional moments, where separations, developing subjectivities and subject-hood are negotiated and established. If this did not occur, if there were no transition or change between the series of images taken over the course of a two year period between her first and third birthdays, then the ethics would be very different, as this would simply be something maternally narcissistic in nature. Transformation between the status of the mother and child is not only evident in my own practice. In fact, Cameron describes early performances with her daughters where her main focus was on their needs and the changes that took place as they got older (Cameron, *A Cage* and *Enmeshed* 1972 - onwards).

Over the years, on occasion, Cameron's twins would go off with a babysitter, sometimes they would take a full part in the work. Nevertheless, on some level, working directly with young children does require an awareness of the moral

dilemma of never having obtained their full consent. Therefore, there is the inescapable problem of presenting self-portraiture, live art practices with children, and maternal aesthetics as resistant to dominant representational forms, while simultaneously relying on the potential objectification of the child to achieve the required result. This exposes the configuration of women and children's subjectivity and agency within wider culture and theorisation. In this context, the maternal within performance is a means of conceiving of a space between subject-hood and object-hood. I argue that it is both the mother and the child that occupy this indeterminate space, although this can encompass all subjects. It is clear that the element of play involved in *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012) may, as a process, conjure up for the viewer visions of collusion and coercion, but this is a judgement that originates from the patriarchal moral framework I have already discussed, and this is not the stance I make in response to this work, as I argue that the benefits far outweigh any ethical dilemma.

The maternal informs the nature of this continued exploration between subjects. Experience and behaviours observed and encountered while mothering lend an atmosphere of childlike irreverence to the performances. These include being inattentive, playful, taking on the role of the outsider, transgressing physical boundaries, the use of senses other than sight, such as sound or smell, and an intersubjective or permeable approach with the spectator. Benjamin argues that 'we must reject the assumptions underlying the psychoanalytic early gender development. These are: that mothers cannot offer their daughters what fathers offer their sons, the figure of separation and agency' (Benjamin, 1990, p. 112). Benjamin continues in this vein, stating how she believes that 'given substantial alterations in gender expectations and parenting, both parents can be figures of separation and attachment for their children' (ibid). A strong factor within maternal aesthetics is both how to negotiate and renegotiate separations and also how to represent them, and the radical nature of representing this process should not be downplayed. The games depicted in my performances to camera remain radical, because of the continued difficulty in transcending outdated gender and parenting models.

### 3.6 Conclusion

When I created *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012), what fascinated me, in particular, was Matilda's complete absorption in me and her surroundings and her inattention to, and lack of awareness of, herself and the camera. In this context, the camera was very imposing as it was a tripod-mounted device and the cameraman was a figure lurking in the shadows. When Matilda began to look at the operator I ceased making these works with her. There were other factors involved, such as having to complete risk assessments that meant having to describe in advance what I thought would occur, which detracted from the initial spontaneity I had felt. Later, I would come to realise that we had performed her discovery of self-awareness, and the development of an intersubjective relationship between us. The beneficial role-playing that occurred in *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012), is in part what Benjamin describes as the type which provides an environment where the child can imaginatively entertain both roles of 'leaving and being left', and in this way begins to transcend the complementary mother-daughter relationship (Benjamin, 1995, p. 43). In other words, in these performances we do not witness a child's oppression, but rather through the form of play and performance, a child's becoming. In the light of the fact that the beginnings of subjectivity were fostered in this photographic performance space, and through the play a new found intersubjective dimension emerges in the relationship between myself and Matilda that continues to develop, dismissing the work on ethical grounds – coercion through play perhaps, or the child's assumed lack of agency - is erroneous and disavows the radical nature of this gesture. There is another dimension to this which further radicalises the gesture, which is that my subjectivity can be seen to re-emerge. As Benjamin argues 'it is this blindness, the inability to symbolically represent that first relation and the separation from it that makes of woman a dangerous hole into which the individual may disappear' (ibid, p. 85).

Inverting this idea and revealing some part of this process of separation, as occurs in *MSP with Matilda* (2011-12), is a powerful gesture. A mother who can play with her child, a mother who is actively mothering, shows her daughters that 'girls (later to be women) [can] learn "that they do not have to grow up to be motionless mothers"' (Benjamin, 1995, p. 111). Of course, the nuance here is that an active depiction of a

woman is a radical idea since the patriarchal norm is passivity. Benjamin comments that the difficulty that this presents for 'feminist consciousness is to imagine how a woman, as daughter or mother, can transform the space of inevitable separation and loss into a space of creation and play' (ibid), which I maintain is precisely the concern I am encountering whilst making this work. Emphasising play, and the process of emerging subjectivity, alters any assumption that the child's lack of awareness renders them without agency, because what we observe in the process of play and care which embody intersubjectivity very instigation of that capacity.



Fig. 24. *Signs/Sights*, Shirley Cameron with daughter Colette, (1995).

The practice I have discussed, which includes my daughter in my performance and, similarly, Cameron's twin daughters who are included in her performance works, as well as Surman's performance-to-camera provoke questions about the lack of agency of the infants/ children and can be perceived as troubling. However, I would reiterate that it is exactly this examination of agency which is the crux of this critique as an exploration of women's representational power and subjectivity, explored through normative and radical connections to maternal symbolism and acts of care. In making the link, between myself, Šimić and Cameron as sharing a maternal aesthetic in our performing with our children, I make an original contribution to knowledge because there exists only a minimal amount of study into women's performance with their daughters, and Cameron's work has never been analysed in this way.



Fig. 25. *Service*. Shirley Cameron & Roland Miller and daughters Colette & Lois, (1987).

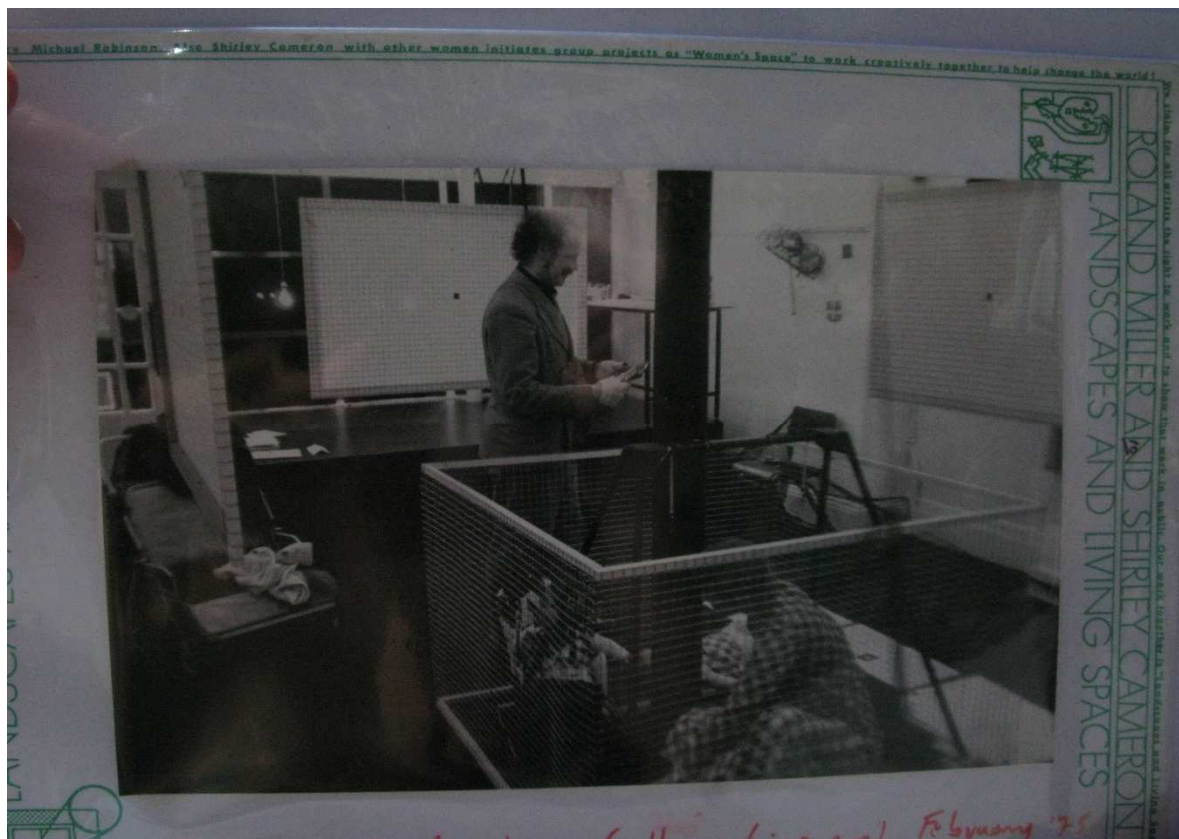


Fig. 26. *Enmeshed*. Shirley Cameron and Roland Miller with daughters Colette & Lois, (1974).

Both mine and Cameron's practices, with our daughters (Fig. 25. 26. 27), challenge phallogentric objectification through the insertion of the maternal in aesthetics. In the practice I have submitted, I have used performance-to-camera as a means to invert the gaze, and I have performed the hysteric full of longing and desire. These are continuations of feminist challenges to the photographic space and its potentially normative functioning through rendering difference the same. However, in this



chapter I have aimed to argue that that same photographic space freed me from the constraints I felt at the time, for example, from the expectations of a final break from my daughter symbolised in stages such as the process of weaning, and the mirror phase and self-recognition. My argument is, that the depictions that remain from our studio experiments and the other examples of maternal performance I have given, demonstrate the notion of mutual recognition and in this way, equality and agency developed between myself and my child. This presents a radicalisation of acts of care and abandons ideology grounded in passiveness, dominance and dependency when conceiving of the mother-child relationship.



Fig. 27. *MSP with Matilda*, Myfanwyn Ryan, (2011-2012).

At stake in mother art-making and maternal aesthetics is the enmeshing of subjectivity and practice. The argument for the inclusion of Matilda in my work begs the question of why an artist who is a mother should position her child outside of the frame. My question centres on the maternal aesthetic as a performance process that can collapse the distancing effects and, conversely, the invasiveness of the photographic space, and thereby destabilise the power inherent in the binaries of

passive spectatorship and the objectified subject. The practice I have made since these series of performances-to-camera, is informed by my observations and interactions with my daughters, without them having to be there necessarily. This is because the maternal invokes process and negotiation, of which separation and absence are major factors, as much as attachment and togetherness. It marks a coming full-circle from the performance where I miss/possess my grandmother to the performances where I hide from my daughter, where I also both miss and possess her. The extreme phallogentric position grants woman no interior subjectivity; she is just surface, just outside (Irigaray, 1985, p. 197). The performance in the frame of a maternal aesthetic is a direct assault on what constitutes the interior/exterior, as well as other binaries such as presence and the conception of an "I". The practice I have submitted forms part of a dialogue about the nature of being, from a subjective position that is uncomfortably and insistently Other to traditional aesthetic distancing effects created through framing and displaying, instead physicality and everyday experiences foreground my experience of art-making and my aesthetic alongside the world and the Others I encounter it with, namely in this instance my daughter. The maternal space that I have created through these series of performances-to-camera challenges the basis that my role as a mother is constituted upon and reminds us of the deeper metaphysical nature of care. These performances demonstrate the relational potential of performance and photography and their combined potency when aligned with a maternal aesthetic.



#### 4: Conclusion

This thesis has analysed different moments in women's historic and contemporary performance-to-camera. Artists Ana Mendieta, Dawn Woods, Jemima Stehli, Lena Šimić, Evelyn Silver and Shirley Cameron have been discussed in order to identify, and evidence, some of the different modes performance-to-camera can operate in. This thesis argues that performance-to-camera remains vital in women's art-making because of the unresolved relationship it has to the frame, binary oppositions and aesthetic processes. The idea of separation as a false premise for the art-object, as proposed by Derrida through the parergon; when practicing non-traditional or critical modes of aesthetic enquiry, complimented Alison Stone's theorisation that the mother does not have to separate (at least not violently or in a finite sense) from her daughter. The making of performance with my daughter was already a challenge to the more prevalent viewpoint that a point of separation will be reached in due course as part of mothering. I turned, instinctively, to performance to help navigate this territory and find out another way to be with my daughter.

The final part of this enquiry sought to connect the challenge of a critical performance-to-camera practice to established patterns and representations of sexual identity, most pertinently, in this context, the mother's role, the establishment of agency, and the development of a toolkit to enhance visibility and act as a counter-strategy to lack through care and apprehension of the other. Evidenced here is how the practice-based elements provided a deeper understanding of performance-to-camera practice in conjunction with maternal aesthetics, which by its very nature, is an emergent and fluid methodology because it draws upon personal experience and the desires of mothers and their children. This exploration of the maternal in aesthetics has taken performance-to-camera away from the tired analysis of the critique of the male gaze, where it was trapped, and has demonstrated how much is at stake in the potential for performance-to-camera to be a radical address to Western fine art aesthetics and metaphysical knowledge and subjective representation. This becomes clear in the final section of the thesis when care and its role in maternal performance is explored, not whether to not to care or be caring, but rather *care* in terms of that which we give our attention and focus and how this informs our experience.

In Chapter One posed the research question: ‘does photography empower the subject, or conversely, are feminist interventions in photography, subsequently described in this thesis as performance-to-camera, a failed critique?’ Performance-to-camera can remain<sup>116</sup> too reliant on aesthetic distance and therefore is uncritical of binary thinking; which is phallogentric in origin, and thereby not clearly establish a subject position different from the masculine one. The distancing effect of aesthetics is difficult to dismantle within a form like photography that is so bound to the gaze and the frame. Stehli’s *Friends with Benefits* (2000) proved to be an important example of the continued critical enquiry into subjectivity, culture, the camera, power and the gaze that is the filter that women’s performance-to-camera tends to get understood and theorised through. Most interesting is that in Stehli’s practice the gaze shifts between masculine and feminine positions which is, arguably more sophisticated than that of Laura Mulvey’s fixed male gazer<sup>117</sup> (*Narrative Cinema and Visual Pleasure*, 1975). The thesis charted the camera’s use in performance away from it being a fraught relationship in which women artists confronted phallogentrism, for example, Mendieta’s *Rape Scene* (1973), to its transformation into a playful discursive space, for example, Stehli’s interventions. Somewhere in the middle the work of artists such as Dawn Woods and Amelia Ulman reside, they are obsessive and perhaps exhibit addictive, compulsive, and also approval seeking behaviour in their, what can only be described as, their somewhat troubled relationship with the camera and the broader spectrum of social media<sup>118</sup>.

A critique of the power of traditional aesthetics to pacify dissent through containment and diffusion was problematised here because of the inclusion of young children in some of the practice-based work included. However, intention is key to an understanding of the maternal aesthetic that includes one’s daughters in the frame. The ethical dilemmas presented by the frame and the child’s lack of agency are

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<sup>116</sup> There are other avant-garde performances and live art practices that also interrogate the false premise of aesthetic distance, displacement of the audience and participation, for example, are two techniques that have been used. Allan Kaprow’s ‘happenings’ in the 1960s, sought to close the distance between performers, artists, and their audience. However, arguably the most effective and uncontrived way I have found to do this is through the maternal aesthetic.

<sup>117</sup> I review these debates in the introduction to the thesis, the male gaze forms the background context rather than the main trajectory of my practice or argumentation. Kaja Silverman and Jacques Lacan are important voices aspects of the gaze.

<sup>118</sup> To clarify, Woods and Ulman play with the camera and do not display hostility towards it nor are suspicious of its power and effect over them, instead they appear somewhat in thrall to its charms.

mirrored by the mother's lack of agency when photographed as a passive subject, but performance-to-camera is far from passive. I began by perceiving performance-to-camera as a discursive, if flawed, critique that could never fully escape those technological aspects of the device that favour rationality, or the aesthetic distance that can be established via the frame. This penetration into the visual, by what, in some patriarchal discourses, has been rendered the pure and inescapable materiality of women, is pertinent with regard to the double aspect of the camera, which is that the camera is controlled by human and machine, and Flusser perceives this as embodying a battle between machine and humanity (Flusser, 2000), whereas it is actually apparent that the conflict is situated between the pre-supposition of binary logic and its inevitable collapse.

In Chapter One Stehli's performance-to-camera *Friends with Benefits* (2000) was considered as a means to explore methods of approaching the photographic space that invert, disrupt or problematise the relationship between subject and cameraman. Subsequently, in chapter one, there was discussion of the practice-based elements performance-to-camera specifically *MNWG* (2010) which, like Stehli's performance, explores the relationship between the subject and the cameraman. The performance is my work, I used my relationship with Duncan, the camera-man, to question the relationship of the looker and the looked and the binary of inside or outside the image. The argument throughout this chapter is that simply presenting objectification and violence against women, or the phallogentric myth of their passivity, does not actually destabilise power imbalances. Traditional aesthetic conventions such as 'women as material in need of aestheticizing' and the inevitability of the framing and normalising capacity of the camera act as ways to maintain and police subjectivity and representation. Therefore hysteria and the misrepresentation of women in front of the camera, which is the theme of *MNWG* (2010) are strategies to discuss women's muteness and invisibility at a cultural and philosophical level.

Chapter Two addressed the research question: 'how can representing mother-daughter relationships re-invigorate women's performance-to-camera, in the light of the failure of historical feminist interventions to successfully oppose the maintenance

of dualistic thought'. There is a growing awareness of the radical nature of representing mother-daughter relationships in the face of the potential matricidal urges prevalent, in accord with Irigaray, in our culture. This was then linked to the potential the camera offers as a space to open up discourse, and via Heidegger, enabled a way to move away from perceiving the camera as a battle-ground between binaries, such as real and fiction, and nature and technology. Although this is also combined with an awareness that the camera is paradoxical in nature. In Heidegger's essay *The Question Concerning Technology* (1977), he defines technology by appropriating from the ancient Greek meaning (techne) to demonstrate its roots in creativity and poetry. The practice based research here acted as an important counterpoint to the more restrictive and negative conceptions of technology, and provided a framework so that the potential of the camera as a creative and experimental tool could be realised.

Within the practice-based element of the thesis there is a strong inter-relationship that exists between the frame and the camera, and performance-to-camera. This thesis, by focusing on the frame has been able to connect the strands - Irigaray and her blind spot (1974), and Derrida's parergon (1987a), and integrate these themes within feminist critique born out of the debates on embodiment and the return to theories of the maternal in the 1990s and 2000s. Lack refers poignantly to the role of an 'eternal void' that women have been tasked to play (Alison Stone, 2011). This has been remedied, to an extent, through the practice-based approach that has deployed performance-to-camera, because the camera, through the utilisation of Derrida's parergon, now acts as a bridge between inside and outside or to take an Irigarayan perspective, the front and reverse, and in this way, the visibility of women can be explored in a critical mode within this thesis's research. The camera can enable the inversion of positions, and this was the aim. Collaborating with Duncan and Matilda meant that both the passive, and the active roles, could be examined and, perhaps, altered.

The thesis has theorised that the maternal acts symbolically by pushing at the edges of representational conduct, it is taboo breaking even whilst it often remains subtle

and nuanced. Stone's (2012) theory of the importance of the mother-daughter relationship has been utilised in order to demonstrate, in Chapter Two, how it confounds binary logic. A progression to this was demonstrating how Jessica Benjamin's (1993) psychoanalytical theory proposes a resistance to the logic of separation between mother and infant, and thereby opposes the presentation of the maternal as an object to be consumed. The desire to leave one another and return, hide away and reveal ourselves, explore and expand and huddle together, and theories of transition, the mirror phase, weaning, separation and counter-theories that are resistant to Freudian narratives are all combined with the experiential, with what was occurring in the space between myself and my daughter. This resulted in reflection on how feminine sexual identity and subsequently how subjectivity is formed and influenced by external as well as internal factors. Stone and Benjamin's stance on separation was crucial to the conception and execution of the work made with Matilda, which began as an emotional rather than an intellectual pursuit. Directly experiencing the pressure from extended family, social constraints and parenting and developmental theories to initiate separations from my daughter caused us distress. In the light of how unnatural, perfunctory and upsetting it felt I sought out feminist theorising that contradicted the mainstream rhetoric from which I felt alienated. The practice manifests this struggle and the uncertainty of motherhood and the, what seemed to me, inevitable clash with phallocentrism that motherhood, I argue, automatically sets up. In the myriad ways it breaks down boundaries between bodies<sup>119</sup>, and its metamorphosing, and the many ways that carers interact with children in their care and how intersubjectivity, as proposed by Benjamin (1993) provides a far more accurate model of the process that occurs<sup>120</sup>.

In Chapter One I discussed, how the camera (like the frame) is paradoxical, and how it internally deconstructs what it supposedly maintains on the surface. In short

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<sup>119</sup> Theories of embodiment from Irigaray, to Elizabeth Grosz, and Bracha Ettinger, *et al*, support this view.

<sup>120</sup> Intersubjectivity, for Benjamin, is a radical address to the more traditional psychoanalytical conceptions of the mother as a transitional object for the infant. The traditional viewpoint can be deemed phallocentric as it relies heavily on the mother to remain passive and, in a sense, allow the infant to consume her. My performances with Matilda ask why can't the mother take an active role in her child's psychological/subjective development? Further to this when the passive model of the mother is abandoned it enables the conception that other relationships can be developed where intersubjectivity and equality are the central focus. Therefore the mother, potentially, has a lasting and radical impact on the way her child is formed and the shape their future relationships will take.

although there may be a claim for some degree of exteriority from the world this is an illusion. The camera is a framing device, but photographs are full of objects and/or subjects in excess of the content of the images, whether by design or by accident. It is these extraneous things that Derrida uses as evidence (1987a) to support his theory on the parergon, I engineered *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012) in such a way, so that the subjects are never able to pose and thereby take up the focal point in the image. I give Matilda my focus and she gives me hers and the camera is disregarded. Are we attempting to escape the camera's gaze or is it that we are not actually the subject matter at all but rather the parergon in a Derridian sense (1987a), this uncertainty puts the frame under pressure and, by extension, phallogentrism is also put under strain. To this instability I bring the confusion of my relationship with my daughter. I choose the word confusion as our presentation of intersubjective becoming confounds conceptions of the subject that are reliant on isolation and distance from the other brought on through separation.

Chapter Three examines the question: 'can performance-to-camera be a relational process that facilitates subjectivity when maternal aesthetics is invoked? Conversely, I wondered whether a mother-artist's inclusion of her child in the frame risks repeating the phallogentric power dynamic of enslavement through representation (objectification) by treating the child as 'thing,' and treated as other. This is less a strictly ethical concern in this context. Rather, I find it conceptually contradictory to demand agency for myself whilst denying the same to others. In addition, if a subject is rendered mute, this upholds the matter/form binary prevalent in Western aesthetics, which is in part disrupted when the subject controls the representation from the inside, as is the case in performance-to-camera. By not allowing the subject a voice or agency they become purely material, and this empowers neither the mother nor the child. However, I conclude that the mother's pragmatism in making work with her child is in itself an unsettling act, as it rejects notions of the mother as, ultimately, a disposable vessel for the infant. Here, Grace Surman's performance-to-camera, *I Love My Baby and My Baby Loves...* (2010), is an important reference point for me in this respect, as it attempts to navigate the troubled territory of free will, of agency and the intersection of the mother's desires. I have considered Stone's critical re-evaluation of Julia Kristeva's position that the child's separation is

a violent matricidal process (Stone, 2012), and I concur with Stone that play and imaginative interaction with the child can be used to begin to establish subjective positions for both mother and child that are both distinct but also linked to the other. Like Stone, I was interested in Jessica Benjamin's (1990) idea of a space, or what Stone describes as a third term. Following the psychoanalytical model of the infant's triangular relationship with a mother and a father,<sup>121</sup> but replacing the father figure with a place where the child and mother can, in a sense, find one another, enables the mother and child to further establish and continue to interact without the necessity of a violent separation, whilst also completely dispensing with the patriarchal power inherent in the triadic model. Stone's argument, and my representation of a continuing connection with my daughter (*MSP with Matilda* 2011-2012) can, therefore, be viewed as a radical act in Western culture because it does not adhere to the view of the mother's inevitable erasure. I conclude, therefore, that the powerful meaning and radical intention behind my work far outweighs any question of dubious ethical judgement in this context<sup>122</sup>, and I make reference to the photography of Sally Mann and Tierney Gearon to provide evidence of the pariah-like status that mother-artists can attract in wider society to demonstrate the intensity of emotion work such as this provokes. These emotions can include disgust and anger towards mother-artists, as has been the case for the aforementioned, but I have only experienced mild disapproval.

In *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012) Matilda's inattention towards the camera is not affected, it is real and she is ignorant to its presence. She poses as the naive counterpoint to our collective immersion in the image<sup>123</sup>. The child, who remains uninterested in the camera, can be read as oppositional to Flusser's notion of the universe being comprised of photographs. However, *MSP with Matilda* (2011-2012) simultaneously secures a conception that the universe is situated in the photographic site because, to an extent, I see her development as encapsulated in that space and

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<sup>121</sup> The triangular model is the traditional paradigm of the family, where the father is the third term, or the thing that gets between the infant and the child, as developed by Freud and Lacan in their developmental theories. Upended entirely by Stone's suggestion that the third term in a mother and child's relationship is play (Stone, 2011).

<sup>122</sup> Here, I am responding to the criticism levelled at my methodology by a white, middle class, male, university lecturer, that play is an act of coercion to secure the child's apparent co-operation. Rather, play is the element that creates the space that allows our interaction and the development of my work simultaneously.

<sup>123</sup> This process which began in the 1980s, according to Flusser, and has yet to subside. This pre-dates our regular encounters with digital devices Flusser first described the world as a 'photographic universe' in the 1980s (Flusser, 2000, p. 65).

time even though her development is continual. This is because it has been within the photographic space where some of my first meaningful inter-subjective encounters with Matilda first occurred, it is where I learnt how to act out changes and progress our relationship through the means of interaction. This process was completely creative and was not pre-scripted, although in retrospect I can apply Stone and Benjamin's refusal of matricide and the establishment of a third term as a space for play as inherent to the Studio Performances I was making in 2011 and 2012.

If the problem I have been addressing is that the mute subject, when solely represented by others is not empowered and cannot transcend the position of material or object existing in a psychoanalytical sense within a subject order as object or negative inversion of masculinity, then a solution can be found in my methodology where the dialogue between the frame, performance-to-camera and maternal aesthetics seeks to disrupt binaries of external and internal, and, subject and object. The camera's process, to frame and interiorise the real and exteriorise and reject what is deemed un-important, or un-aesthetic or un-interesting based on pre-ordained value judgements that immerse our culture<sup>124</sup> is inverted and portrays its own reverse or underside. Like Stehli I seek to comment on the hierarchical nature of sexual difference by taking control of the image away from the cameraman<sup>125</sup>. The overall aim of disrupting these binaries is empowerment through

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<sup>124</sup> I have been discussing how performance-to-camera maintains a critical relationship to this process, but people who 'Selfie and Instagram' are inherently un-critical in their utilisation of these processes, where to be seen for seeing's sake appears to take on an addictive and compulsive dimension. I speak from observation and discussion with others, with artists such as Dawn Woods and Amelia Ulman, and the behaviour of young people towards screens and cameras that I encounter in secondary schools and in the art galleries in which I facilitate.

<sup>125</sup> Stone argues that Irigaray radically rethought feminist analysis of sexual difference by arguing that, in Western culture, there is only a difference between the sexes in terms of hierarchy. In all other aspects, women simply present the negative of masculine attributes, for example by being passive to man's productive, being weak to man's strength, and so on. Stone asserts that Irigaray successfully argues for the non-subjective position that women play, which is not born from genuine sexual difference, but rather stems from the repression of the other, and is designed in a hierarchical way to disempower women. Here, the term *women* is meant on a psychological level as the specific conditioning a young girl has received that she carries into adulthood:

These hierarchical meanings of male and female, masculine, and feminine, are at the core of the Western symbolic order. They organize a whole set of binary oppositions that make up this order—that is, the underlying structure of meaning that constitutes the backbone of Western culture: contrasts of mind/body, culture/nature, reason/emotion, reality/appearance, truth/deception, good/evil, active/passive, and order/chaos [...] Irigaray concludes that no real



process, and interplay and communication between the mother and the child. In addition, the emphasis on an intersubjective approach fosters discourse inter-generationally. I conclude that the focus on an inter-subjective approach, by its very nature, emphasises process over end result, the performance-to-camera pieces I have submitted are merely the by-product of my closed performances. They are more than documentation because in concurrence with Dixon's definition of digital performance, that was a starting point when I was pinpointing the nuances between documentation and digital performance for my literature review; the digital performance is self-reflexive and always comments upon the media used in its creation (2006). In my practice, this takes the form of meditation on the frame, and what it is to frame. I choose to focus on the camera, rather than broaden my scope to other media in this thesis, because the frame is so apparent and so integral, and because in our contemporaneity that remains strong, despite the proliferation of digital media. This meditation has proved both fascinating and fruitful.

Why does the camera continue to overbear and control and inflict a gaze which confines the subject so easily? I do not simply re-iterate the Lacanian mirror phase and the camera/gaze coupling ascribed to by theorists such as Mulvey (1975) and Silverman (1996); I am more concerned with how we set up the shot, how we frame something and what that says about us. My position upholds the mother's agency and maintains that it is not automatically unethical to include one's children in your art-making as it is an expression of subjectivity and in many ways enriches the mother-daughter relationship. I conclude that the maternal methodology, coupled with performance-to-camera, particularly as my focus is mother-daughter relationships, is a radical re-think of the medium. However, this does not completely resolve the ethical questions that present themselves in this methodology, namely issues of agency, consent, autonomy and abuses of power. My approach to resolving this has been to explore the caring nature of this work, and to look at how

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sexual difference has ever existed at the symbolic level, in the sense that it is only as a man that one has been able to be a thinking, speaking, acting subject. Rather than genuine difference, there has only ever been hierarchy and binary opposition between 1 and 0, where 1 is male, 0 the female construed as mere lack. Irigaray nevertheless refers to this traditional refusal of genuine difference as sexual difference, under the hierarchical, oppositional interpretation it has had up to now (Stone, 2018, p. 9).

subjectivities are intertwined and how this also challenges the phallogocentric ideal of subjectivity that worryingly veers towards the erasure of the mother. In the final chapter, I considered more specifically the depth of meaning in maternal art-making and its potential to establish a new symbolic order. I re-focused on the act of care through Heidegger's writing on being as co-dependent on being-here (Dasein). The experience of care, like all aspects of our experience, is immersive and connected physically to others and also to objects. Care is not to be confused with being kind (that is 'caring'). Rather care is the attention we pay to another or a thing (Heidegger, 1973) and the time we give to such care. In this way it is possible to begin to conceive of the act of care for a child as an act that is metaphysical and transcendent to the chore-based, mundane, unskilled and everyday conception that appears inherently attached to childcare, at the very least at the worst end of phallogocentric misconceptions. Sara Ruddick supports the view that to mother is not simply menial, it is a complex intellectual and interpersonal activity. Further to this, and in alignment with Benjamin's view that mothering provides a unique as well as radicalised perspective, this does not sit well with binary thinking because, as Ruddick argues, interaction with children demands an 'open-ended, reflective cognitive style' (Ruddick, 1990, p. 96). She also argues that thinking which relies on sharp distinctions between self and other, and fiction and reality, would be impossible to apply whilst caring for a child (ibid). Mothering also enables a re-assessment of the act of domination because, as Ruddick further asserts:

A mother learns first-hand, as agent and spectator, in the position of the stronger and of the weaker, that the cost of dominating is paid in the fear and hatred of the dominated and anyone who sympathises with them. Mothers have many dominating moments and therefore experience in their own person what it means to lose the trust of the dominated and to watch those they dominate lose pleasure in themselves. Most mothers also know what it is to be dominated (Ruddick, 1990, p. 182).

This quotation is important to me for two reasons. Firstly it shows why mothers are, uniquely equipped to critique hierarchy and power, and secondly it shows that care is not domination. Maternal aesthetics is to care rather than to dominate. Ruddick argues that 'a mother may measure her power in terms of her ability to nurture a child whom she *cannot dominate*, a child lively with her own desires and projects' (ibid).

Šimić's term '*givens*' is key to forming a maternal aesthetic moving through themes of documentation, classification, aestheticizing the everyday through re-assigning its purpose, and bathos – or elevation of mundanity. *Givens* encompasses all of the above and clearly outlines the necessity for working with what you already have, weaving day-to-day activities including childcare and domestic chores into the practice and how this, in turn, becomes a political activity. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Maintenance Art Works* (1969-1980), and her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (1969) as one of the most pertinent historic examples used in the thesis which clearly states this aim.

Lastly, I want to re-iterate that in this time of image saturation, we must go further than historic performance-to-camera to critique phallocentrism, and that invoking the maternal is a radical proposition in the medium of performance-to-camera. I have demonstrated this through the interplay between the frame and the world and the maternal, and the role of aesthetics and the significance it takes on for mothers. The intersubjective dimension of the maternal aesthetic has led me to produce further work since my PhD submission, where intimate engagement with others is not solely reliant on photography, nor on purely visual or digital means – my initial medium. Through performance, the evocative nature of touch, sound and smell have all become key. Increasingly, I have taken inspiration from the literal in-between of the corridor and the pregnant body, as well as the infant state, all of which are transitions. These transitions all point to possible methods that can dismantle structures of oppression. Bearing in mind how oppression can be subtle, such as feeling isolated or mentally unstable, and can be manipulated as a form of control, the subtleties of oppression and deviance are aspects that I have exploited in more recent works following those included in this thesis, including *Waiting, Resting and Sniffing in Public Spaces* (2012-2013).

The themes that have emerged through the course of the thesis, most pertinently the emphasis on mother-daughter relationships and women recounting their own stories, has resulted in the creation of oral history recordings that are an original contribution to knowledge. My methodology works across generations and includes my female relations and continues to inspire new works and ways of working. MNWG is now a flagship example of intergenerational performance and is an original contribution to

knowledge. I have devised additional inter-generational performances such as one with myself and Cameron performing *What's it Like Growing Up in Performance?* Performed as part of Adele Senior's *With Children! The Child as collaborator and performer*, Leeds Beckett University (2017). In this work, I invited Cameron to present a slide show of her historic practice whilst I read statements I had obtained from her daughters (now in their forties) about what they remembered as children about performing and being in the work. Grown children's accounts of performing with their mothers is extremely unique to this field. My method of staging an unstructured open performance across generations is cutting edge and made possible through the foundational work carried out in this thesis which contextualises my approach to intersubjective performance and it is an original contribution in the field of performance.

My thesis has also foregrounded a symposium I organised on the ethics of working with children, held at the *Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home*, hosted by Lena Šimić as part of LADA's *Study Room in Exile* (2017). During this event my approach of inventing my own maternal aesthetic ethical framework, an original contribution to knowledge within this thesis, was extended to a group of mother-artists and we developed a document that is available on the Institute's website<sup>126</sup>.

Since 2016, I have been re-staging avant-garde performance in community settings, looking at engagement with a family audience. I have re-staged Ana Mendieta's *Face Press Glass* (1972) as a walk-about performance for children. I also performed John Lennon and Yoko Ono's 1960s movement of 'Bagism', in a park with my mother and my daughters, and I performed as a bearded lady proclaiming Greek philosophy. I have also made a Rebecca Horn/Louise Bourgeois style performance for children. My interest in the maternal has progressed into an interest in inter-generational performance, and I have both studied and worked with Sybille Peters, Theatre of Research, which created the *Playing Up! Game* (2016) in conjunction with LADA and Tate Modern. I now work in the Tate's early years and family's curatorial department as a supervisor and facilitator, delivering their programme to engage families through live art practice, including the *Academy of Destruction* (2017). I have developed this practice in direct response to the experience and methods I gained and established whilst collaborating with my daughter Matilda.

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<sup>126</sup> Included in the Appendix.

In the wider world, there has been an issue on maternal performance in the *Performance Research Journal*, guest edited by Šimić and Underwood-Lee, who are now working on a publication about maternal performance as a live encounter. On this topic they argue that:

The maternal in performance, as opposed to other art-forms, is able to move from pure representation into the realm of lived and immediate experience; that is, when we present our mothering on stage in a live art encounter we are not simply performing it, we are doing it – we are negotiating identity in real time, in an immediate and shared encounter with an audience. The construction of a maternal identity is happening before our very eyes (Underwood-Lee, 2017).

This presents a different focus to that presented in this thesis, which has looked at visual representation and the discursive relationship of the maternal with performance-to-camera and aesthetics.

I have accomplished original historical research on the maternal practice of Shirley Cameron and due to the recent resurgent interest in the inter-generational I have been able to critique this through a maternal aesthetic and assess its importance away from the overused analysis of the gaze and narcissism. My original contribution to knowledge has been in the field of maternal aesthetics, and the broader context of feminist enquiry. My practice has both helped set-the-scene, as well as, establish a precedent ethically and practically for how best to collaborate with children in live art methodology. I have established clear philosophical links between the frame, women's subjectivity, the maternal, and performance-to-camera and this is an original contribution to knowledge in the field of performance studies and Live Art/ Fine Art theorising.

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